

Pathways to Possible:

Houston's Blueprint for Postsecondary Success

A woman and a young man are looking at a laptop in a classroom. The woman is wearing a lanyard that says "WESTSIDE". The young man is wearing a hoodie. The background shows classroom posters, including one titled "TRANSITION WORDS" and another titled "Character traits".

**GOOD
REASON
HOUSTON**

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Most importantly, thank you to the over one hundred educators who shared their stories, experiences, and campuses with us, truly allowing this project to come to life. We hope this project serves as a small reminder of the incredible work you do and the meaningful impact you make on Houston students and our community.

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Executive Summary

By 2036, an estimated 70% of jobs in Texas will require some form of postsecondary credential. Yet, Good Reason Houston found that only 34% of 2018 Houston-area graduates attained a postsecondary credential within six years of finishing high school, and only 1-in-5 earned enough in young adulthood to qualify as a living wage.¹

While Houston is often celebrated for its diversity and opportunity, economic mobility remains deeply uneven for residents. More than one million Houston-area households, or 44%, struggle to afford basic living costs², with economic outcomes continuing to differ sharply across racial and ethnic groups. National trends tell a similar story: although both Black and white families doubled their median household wealth between 1992 and 2022, the wealth gap between them also doubled over that same period.³

The 45th annual Kinder Houston Area Survey found that Houstonians believe the economy is the region's "biggest problem," fueled by shrinking confidence in job opportunities and growing financial pressures, with the percentage of residents rating job prospects as "good" or "excellent" falling by more than 25%, the sharpest single-year decline since the 1980s.⁴ Creating educational pathways to address the barriers shaping economic mobility and reducing inequities for young people in our region, matters now, more than ever. In 2024, Good Reason Houston launched the Postsecondary Research Initiative¹, which sparked a new question: What would it mean to cultivate educational spaces that support long-term success for Houston students?

This blueprint, part of our High Schools for Postsecondary Success (HSPS) project, aims to answer that question. We visited ten Houston-area high schools whose postsecondary outcomes were above average

for underserved students. Representing different high school models, we found three philosophies united these campuses, what we call **"The Building Blocks of Postsecondary Success"** which put students on the **"Pathways to Possible"**

- **People & Place:** Strong relationships create the conditions and culture that promote student success;
- **Pathways & Pedagogy:** Quality classroom instruction must complement flexible, personalized, and student-centered pathways; and
- **Personnel & Protocol:** Strategic staffing and strong protocols are essential to scaling what works.

These commonalities across campuses point to real, actionable opportunities to strengthen relationships, build meaningful pathways to college and the workforce, and formalize systems that facilitate long-term student success.

The aim of this blueprint is to convert findings into actions and impact. It is designed for school and district leaders, policymakers, and industry and community partners who want to replicate or scale these conditions. The stories and experiences of the educators showcase what Houstonians do best, leverage our diversity, tenacity, innovation, and vibrance, to make Houston the leading education city in the nation. We must respond with our own actions. The evidence is clear on what works. What remains is the will — and infrastructure — to scale it.

¹ 2025 Good Reason Houston Postsecondary Report | ²Understanding Houston

³Urban Institute: Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality in America | ⁴The 45th Kinder Houston Area Survey

Introduction

Houston is home to nearly 700,000 students and two of the three largest school districts in Texas. The scale and diversity of Houston carries an immense obligation to ensure the educational systems we build across our city equitably serve Houstonians.

In 2025, our [Postsecondary Research](#) report named a problem: only 20% of Houston public school graduates enter adulthood equipped with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to enroll in and earn a credential that set them up on the path to economic mobility. These results emerged alongside another profound finding: Graduates who earned a bachelor's degree or professional certification were 3-4 times more likely to earn a living wage than those without a credential.

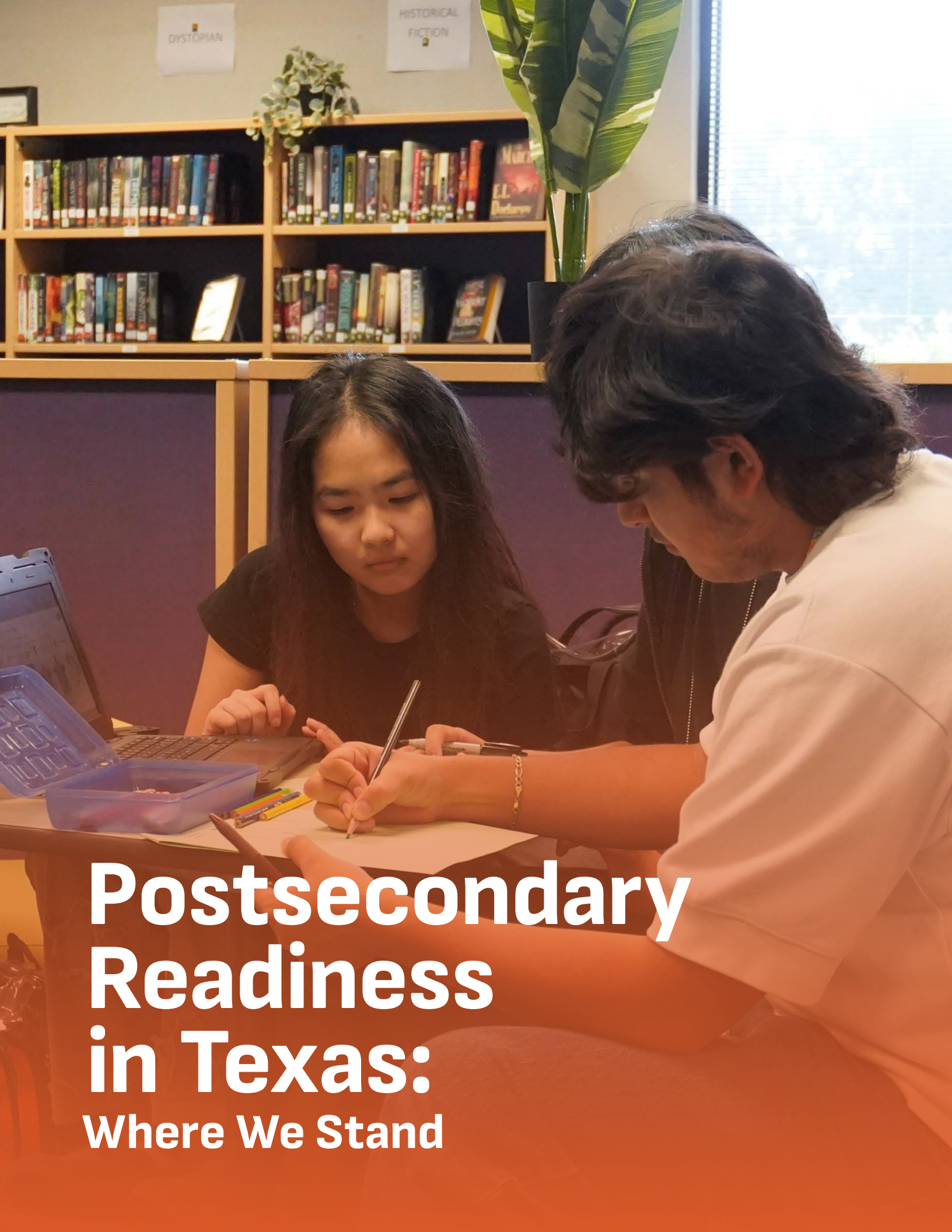
Our work was guided by two questions: How can the Houston K-12 system better prepare students for what comes next from the moment they step foot in the classroom? And which building blocks of a students' high school experience are essential to succeeding in the future?

To answer these questions, we engaged in a two-part mixed methods study where we looked at data from the Houston region class of 2017, six years after their high school graduation and identified schools who exceeded regional averages in postsecondary enrollment, completion, and living wage attainment. We

narrowed our list to 13 Houston-region high schools that put economically disadvantaged students and students of color on paths to economic mobility at higher rates. We then visited ten of these campuses to see how they create **Paths to Possible**, interviewing over 100 educators to learn what they believed propelled their schools and students to success.

This blueprint offers a response to addressing these persistent gaps. It is organized around our guiding framework, "**The Building blocks of Postsecondary Success**", which names three themes: People & Place: centering people - students - at the heart of our schools and school systems; Pathways & Pedagogy: designing learning experiences that complement each other and propel students forward, and Personnel & Protocol: hiring the right people in the right roles and building systems to sustain success.

In the sections that follow, we pair our research findings on each of the P's to Possible with examples of campus practices equitably serving students and elevate insights that are adaptable to different contexts. These examples are not prescriptions — they are a menu of approaches, drawn from real Houston schools, that others can adapt to their own student populations and community contexts. This blueprint thus serves as a tool to support educators, policymakers, funders, and industry and community partners in shaping the direction of their school and systems.



Postsecondary Readiness in Texas:

Where We Stand

Postsecondary Readiness in Texas: Where We Stand

Ensuring students are prepared to pursue a postsecondary pathway, whether college or career, is important now more than ever. [Texas leads the nation in job creation and is the top destination](#) for companies relocating to the United States, however, [Texas 2036 research found](#) that those moving to the Lonestar state for employment tend to be better educated than Texans. If we do not invest in our own students, we risk widening that gap.

In Texas, we measure graduates' postsecondary readiness through College, Career, and Military Readiness (CCMR) indicators through the state's [school accountability system](#). These key indicators, outlined in Figure 1, serve as Texas' primary measure of how well schools are preparing students for life after graduation.

We've seen high school graduation rates steadily increase over recent years; however, many students still graduate without meeting key CCMR benchmarks, revealing deep disparities in postsecondary preparedness. [Recent research](#) shows, not all pathways lead to equitable long-term outcomes. In particular, students who earn CCMR credit through college prep coursework⁵, demonstrate lower levels of college persistence⁶ than students not meeting a CCMR measure at all. While college prep courses marginally increase students' likelihood of going to college, they seem to negatively contribute to their overall trajectory. Black and Brown students are more than twice as likely as their white and Asian peers to complete lower-quality college prep coursework, underscoring disparities in access to pathways that support long-term postsecondary success.

This reinforces that *how* students meet CCMR benchmarks is more important than *whether they meet them*, highlighting [the importance of rigorously preparing students for sustained success across college, career, or military](#).

Figure 1: College, Career, and Military Readiness Key Indicators

College Ready	Career Ready	Military Ready
TSI Criteria (ACT, SAT, TSIA, College Prep Courses)	Industry-Based Certification (IBC) with Aligned Program of Study	Enlistment in the U.S. Armed Forces
Dual Course Credit (9+ in Any Subject OR 3+ in English/Math)	Earns Level I or II Certificate	
Advanced Placement (AP) Exam Criteria (3 or Higher)	Graduates with Completed IEP + Workforce Ready	
International Baccalaureate (IB) Exam Criteria (4 or Higher)	Graduates with Advanced Diploma Plan + Received SPED Services	
Earns an Associate Degree		
OnRamps Course Credit		

⁵In the Texas CCMR context, college preparatory coursework refers to approved courses in English Language Arts and/or Mathematics that students can complete in high school as an alternative way to demonstrate college readiness without meeting the TSI benchmark in the TSIA exam. However, this pathway can contribute to students accumulating excess college credit hours, which puts them at risk of exceeding limits tied to federal financial aid.

⁶Refers to a student's continued enrollment in postsecondary education over time, typically measured by whether a student returns for their second year or remains enrolled through degree attainment.

When specifically examining college readiness outcomes, a more nuanced picture emerges. College readiness rates have risen significantly, as shown in Figure 2, from less than 50% for the graduating class of 2022, up to 70% for the class of 2024, but disparities persist across race and income. College-ready status is the most rigorous CCMR benchmark, requiring students to meet higher academic thresholds, which means gaps in attainment are particularly consequential. Whitestudents reach college readiness benchmarks at higher rates (79%) than Hispanic (69%) and Black students (63%), who are more likely to be classified as career or military ready only (10% vs. 8%). Similar gaps exist by income, with economically disadvantaged (ecodis) students less likely to be college ready (68% vs. 77%) and more likely to rely solely on career or military pathways.

As a result of these disparities, the Texas legislature passed House Bill 3 (HB3) in 2019, introducing the [CCMR Outcomes Bonus](#) (CCMR OB) outlined in Figure 3, which provides state incentive funding for schools when their students meet the more rigorous benchmarks in recognition that graduation rates and less rigorous CCMR benchmarks do not sufficiently ensure students were prepared for the future.

Now, districts can invest in programs that adequately prepare students for meaningful next steps, benefiting both students and the campuses they attend. Our current landscape reflects progress, but underscores the need for more equitable systems that connect students' K-12 experiences to a living wage. We hope our findings serve as inspiration for school leaders, policymakers, and industry leaders to advocate for and invest in rigorous academic instruction, personnel, and systems that improve the likelihood of student success.

Figure 2: College Readiness by Year and Demographic Group.

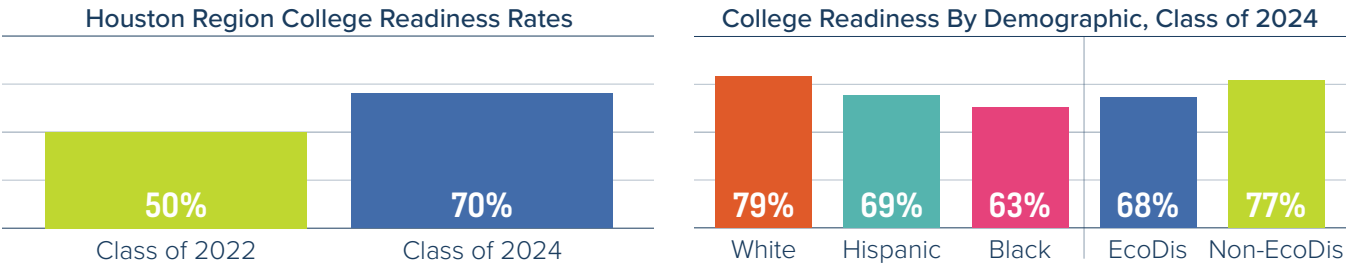
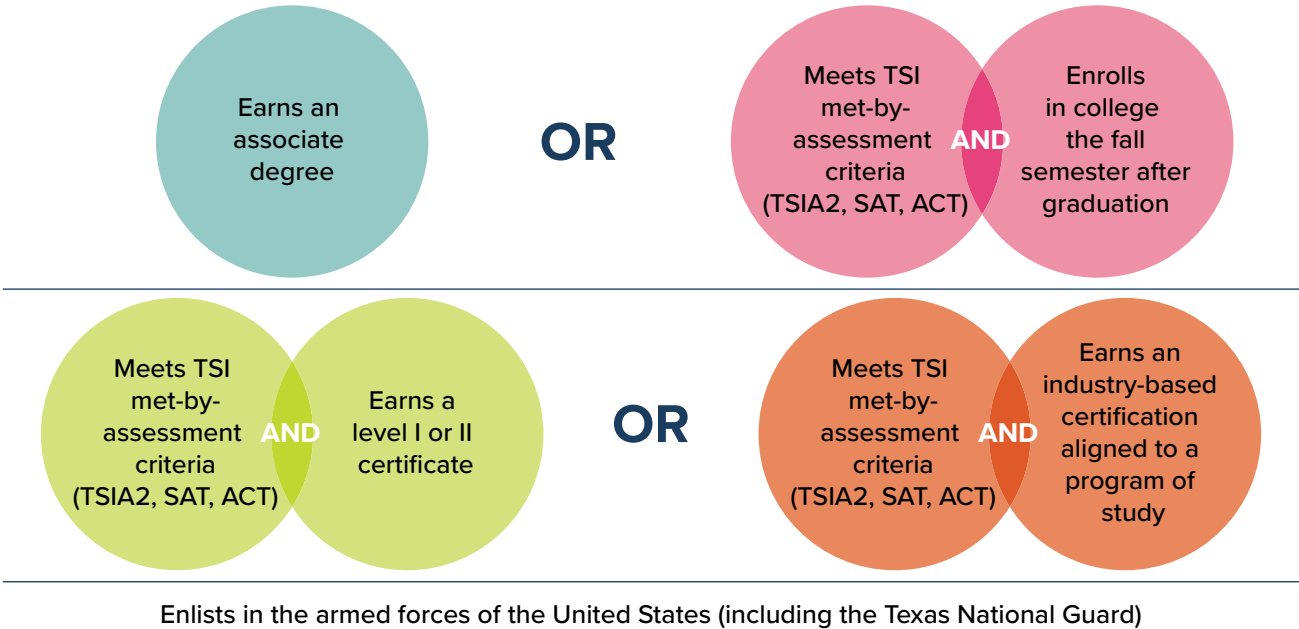


Figure 3: CCMR Outcome Bonus Criteria
House Bill 3 Outcomes Bonus Funding





Pathways to Possible in the Houston Context

Pathways to Possible in the Houston Context

Our 2025 research findings raised two questions: “Which schools deliver stronger outcomes and meaningful pathways for Houston students, particularly historically marginalized students? For schools doing so, what does this look like in practice?”

To find out, we used quantitative data from our 2025 research to identify ten Houston-region high schools and observe in real-time how they cultivate “pathways to possible” for students. These schools (Figure 4) demonstrated stronger postsecondary outcomes (enrollment, credential attainment, and living-wage earnings) compared to other campuses serving similar student populations. To ensure our sample was reflective of Houston’s diverse education system, we selected campuses from school districts across the region and of various school types, including large neighborhood, selective magnet, early college, and charter schools. Our selected methodology can be found in Appendix B and full methodology can be found [here](#).

The HSPS conceptual framework is grounded in the belief that postsecondary success is driven by interconnected ecosystems that shape students’ daily experiences and long-term opportunities. Rather than focusing solely on traditional indicators of academic achievement, this framework examines how school structures, relationships, instructional models, and operational systems work together to cultivate environments where students can thrive. In doing so, the framework intentionally moves beyond deficit-based narratives about student performance and instead centers the institutional conditions that enable strong and equitable outcomes.

Figure 4: High Schools for Postsecondary Success (HSPS) Campus Map

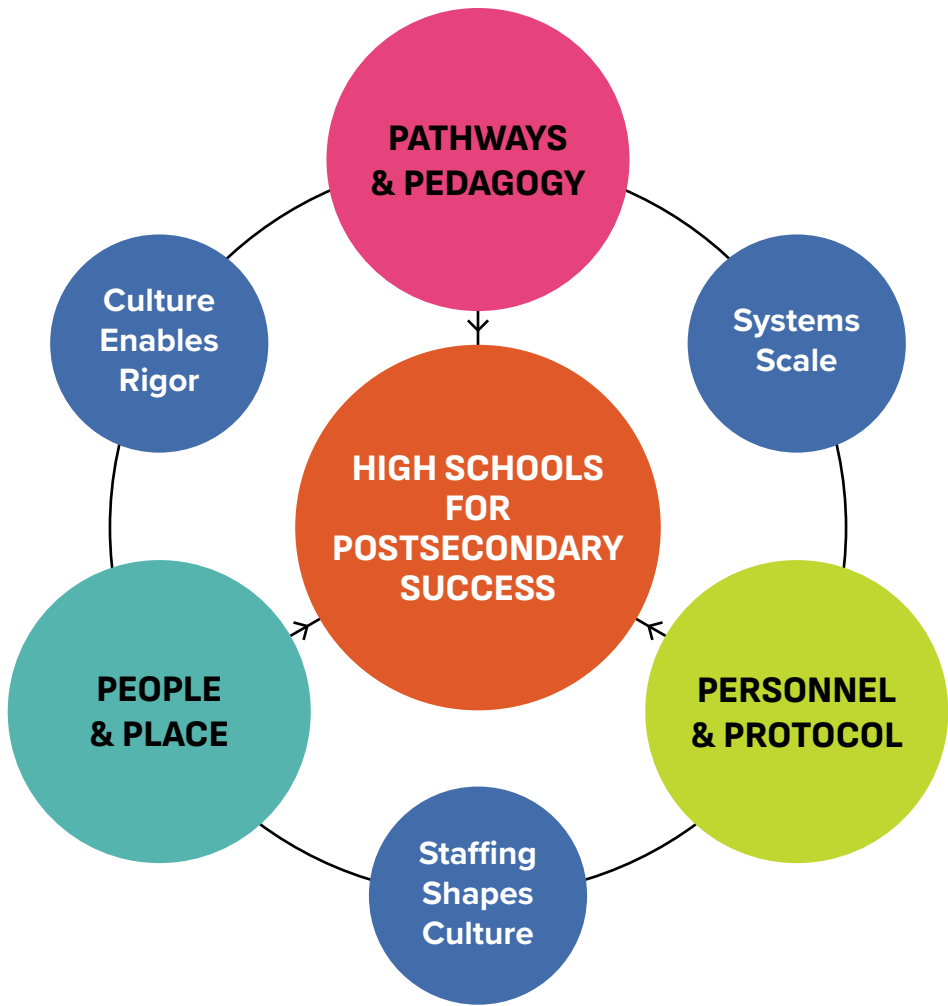


The natural next step was to set foot on these campuses to learn how they create opportunities for their students and experience for ourselves the **The Building Blocks of Postsecondary Success** for ourselves. During our visits, we interviewed school leaders and teachers, conducted a campus tour, and observed classrooms. We collected program summaries, information handouts, and college and career related resources as artifacts. In total, we spoke with over one hundred educators including administrators, college and career counselors, and classroom teachers, focusing on how each campus approached cultivating postsecondary success.

Through analyzing our conversations, observations, and artifacts, three core themes emerged—what we call the **The Building Blocks of Postsecondary Success: People & Place, Pathways & Pedagogy, and Personnel & Protocol**. Figure 5 depicts the relationships between these elements and their contributions to school and student outcomes, which enable conditions of success.

In the remainder of this blueprint, we explore each of the **The Building Blocks of Postsecondary Success** defining what they look like in practice, illustrating them through examples and quotes, and demonstrating how each component contributes to stronger, more equitable postsecondary outcomes.

Figure 5: The Building Blocks of Postsecondary Success





People & Place:

Relationships Build the
Foundation For Possible

People & Place: Relationships Build the Foundation for Possible

Walking the halls of each campus, we experienced a deep sense of purpose held by every individual we interacted with, students and staff alike. This reflects our first theme, **the power of people and its impact on place**. We encountered students engaging with postsecondary opportunities like earning college credits before their diplomas, navigating complex academic pathways, and preparing to enter careers with industry certifications in hand. But none of those things happened by accident. Behind every successful student are the adults who invested hours cultivating and designing meaningful environments for student success.

The word that came up in every conversation was relationships. While academic structures, curriculum, and postsecondary support are all critical to student success, quality relationships between students, staff, and the community serve as the foundation that determines how those systems all function together. Across many campuses, staff spoke about the importance of cultivating intentional, trust-based connections with students, so that every student feels not just known but that they matter.

“We know our kids who are homeless. We know our kids who have food insecurities. We know every one of their struggles, but we don’t exploit those struggles. We wait for them to bring it to us and create a psychologically safe space for them to be vulnerable. We got you here.”

Victory Early College High School Leader

“No matter what a child’s circumstance is at home, it’s about creating enough support here, at Lamar, that when they are here they feel capable and safe”

Lamar High School Leader

Campus leadership (Principals, Assistant Principals, Deans, etc.) plays a pivotal role in establishing this kind of culture. School leaders set the tone for how relationships are built and maintained, through modeling trust, transparency, and a genuine willingness to support both students and staff. When leadership prioritizes psychological safety and shared ownership, teachers and students are empowered to collaborate

and take risks. This, in turn, creates a school culture and environment where expectations are clear and consistently reinforced.

It was evident that such a culture was built by design, not chance. As one Kerr High School counselor put it:

“[School culture] has to do with leadership, specifically the principal, trusting the kids to know what will be good for them, but also knowing that if it crashes and burns, that’s a great lesson too... Everything is student involved and led with their input, and it is probably what makes things more impactful.”

Kerr High School Counselor

Similar themes surfaced around the important value of staff trust and autonomy within their teams to maintain a strong culture. When administration provides clear and consistent expectations, along with the right balance of structure, educators feel empowered to do their best work. A YES Prep leader captured this sentiment well:

“Creating consistency, recognizing your vulnerabilities, and being candid about that with people [the staff], is important, like having a high level of trust in your veteran leaders. Like, yeah, you want to try this thing? Do it. Let me know what you need. If I try to control everything, then we’re not going to get very much done. At some point [you recognize] you’ve hired people who are talented and capable, let them do the things that they do well and you’ll get excellent results.”

YES Prep Southeast Leader

Together, the relationships we saw across HSPS campuses showcased the value of creating a network of support that extends beyond a single person, program, or initiative. They reflect school models moving from transactional to transformational, where students are not simply guided through high school, they are actively prepared to flourish in whatever postsecondary pathway they choose.



ACADEMIC HOUSES

Westside High School

What and How:

When a student enters 9th grade, they are placed into an academic house based on their pathway interests; each house is supported by its own dedicated administrative team. The campus hallways are organized into wings and houses are physically separated, creating distinct space for community building.

Why it Matters:

The house system creates belonging; it gives every student a smaller community within a large comprehensive high school and designated administrators who will follow students for their entire journey.

FAMILY CENTERS

Klein Forest High School

What and How:

The campus has two full-time Family-School Liaisons dedicated to strengthening family engagement, a school market that operates as a food pantry for families in need, and Parent University, which offers classes and workshops that empower families to actively participate in their students' education and partner with the school. The Family Center is supported through intentional investment of Title I funding and aligned to the district's Family Engagement Plan, ensuring dedicated staffing, resources, and programming to meet family needs.

Why it Matters:

By proactively removing barriers and equipping families with tools to actively engage, schools strengthen their connections to families and the community, increase student support systems, and create stable conditions for long-term success.



CAMPUS PRIDE: THE MAVERICK WAY

Pasadena Memorial High School

What and How:

The creation of a culture filled with joy, fun, and care at both the student, staff, and community level. Maverick pride is infused into everything on campus, including the “Maverick March”, a parade in which all student organizations create banners and march through campus, seasonal community events, and the annual crawfish boil for staff appreciation catered by the CTE culinary students. Staff described serving multiple siblings from the same family for years and how families describe the campus as “changing the history of their family.”

Why it Matters:

Cultivation of community through care, trust, and joy signals a deep relationship has been established. Families have seen positive outcomes for their children and make an active choice to repeat them. Whole-school events centering academics, athletics, and arts give visibility to student autonomy to pursue multiple passions and reinforce a culture where students feel publicly honored. When challenges arise, students, staff, and the community fall back on trust to navigate through it together.

SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMMING: FISH CAMP

Victory Early College High School (VECHS)

What and How:

A low-risk summer engagement opportunity for students to meet future classmates, families to gather information, and staff to observe and interact with future Vikings. This space cultivates acclimation to Victory’s culture of excellence, both academically and personally.

Why it Matters:

Creating an onboarding architecture for students and families allows for the building up of student readiness skills, identifying appropriate coursework placement, and aligning on expectations, resources, and points of contact on campus to ensure both students’ and families’ transition to high school is successful.



COLLEGE GOING CULTURE

YES Prep Southeast Secondary

What and How:

Physical spaces and rituals are curated to highlight the successes of the graduating class: a large wall displaying individual portraits of the senior class in their voted on “senior only” polo color, an acceptance wall in a main corridor where every senior can add stickers with where they’ve been accepted, and a college acceptance bell ringing ceremony.

Why it Matters:

These intentional spaces and events transform individual student milestones into community celebrations and make achievement visible. Every student sees themselves and their success, tied to real college acceptances. Younger students see themselves in the senior class. These components reinforce the college going culture, cultivate belonging, and communicate respect for students’ growth.

COMMUNITY EVENTS & FACILITY RENTALS

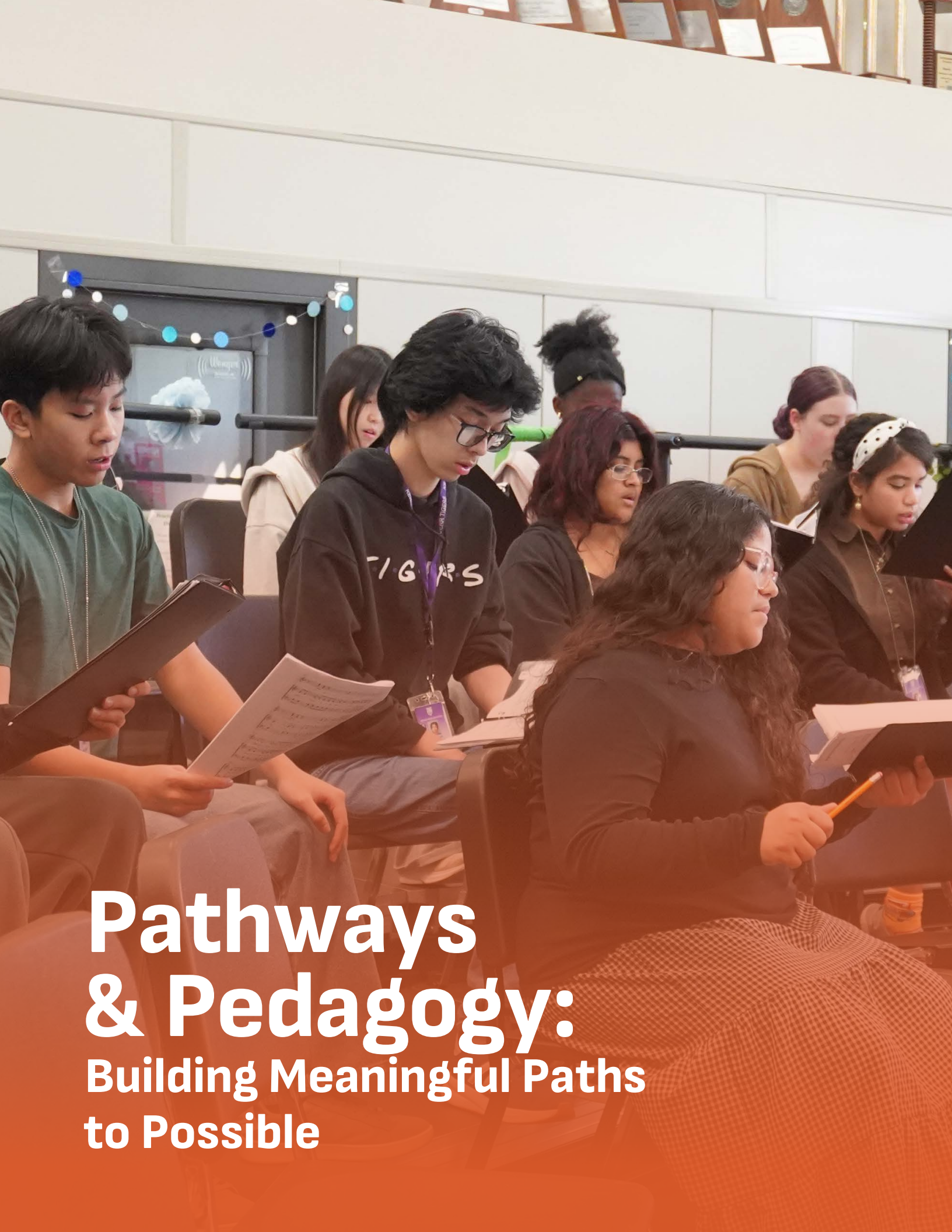
C.E. King High School

What and How:

The campus prioritizes community involvement by creating reciprocal partnerships: the school invests in developing students, and the students, in turn, give back to their community. This is embedded through experiences like culinary and environmental science students growing produce for the Sheldon ISD’s nutrition program, finance pathway students providing free tax preparation through the IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program; and campus facilities like the state-of-the-art football stadium, being made available for community use, with the revenue being reinvested back into the campus.

Why it Matters:

These community-driven experiences and relationships reinforce the relevance of student learning while fostering a sense of responsibility, connection, and belonging, preparing students not only for their careers, but how to actively contribute to and strengthen their communities, and the value of it.

A photograph of a diverse group of students in a classroom or workshop setting. They are seated and looking at papers or clipboards, appearing to be engaged in a learning activity. The background shows a whiteboard and some decorations. The image has an orange overlay at the bottom where the text is located.

Pathways & Pedagogy:

Building Meaningful Paths
to Possible

Pathways & Pedagogy: Building Meaningful Paths to Possible

While strong relationships create the conditions and culture that promote student success, **pedagogies (how skills are imparted and developed in educational contexts) cultivate the meaningful pathways for students to grow.** We saw firsthand how campuses did not rely on a single academic experience for their students. Instead, they build multiple, coherent pathways that guide students from the first day on campus through graduation and into a postsecondary path of their choosing.

At the core of each pathway is thoughtful, interconnected curriculum design, including early access to foundational courses, strategic academic advising, and built-in support for students to gradually take on more challenging academic work. Students are encouraged to explore their interests and develop analytical, writing, and time management skills necessary to succeed outside the classroom. Campuses intentionally scaffold rigorous and diverse course options, including: dual enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB). Rather than treating these as isolated opportunities for a select group of students, they build a pipeline of increasing rigor that all students can navigate with confidence.

On some campuses, hands-on learning experiences within career pathways generated the greatest student interest and results. At Westside High School, the Futures Academy, a program that functions as a hybrid early college and certification pathway, allows students to simultaneously earn an Associate of Science degree through Houston City College, while completing an industry-aligned health science certification. The model provides academic acceleration and direct workforce preparation, enabling students to progress toward a degree while gaining tangible career credentials. As a Westside High School administrator explained, the program offers flexible pathways depending on a students' ability to meet credit hour requirements:

“We have a practicum in pharmacology to become a Certified Medical Assistant. The kids go to the hospitals, tour them, and see rotations, to get a better idea of what they’re interested in and leave with their [Pharmacy Technician] certification. A lot of times they’ll take it and work [jobs that require the certifications] while they are in college.”
Westside High School Administrator

At neighborhood campuses, Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways provided an equally valuable, and often more directly applied, route to postsecondary success. These programs offer industry-aligned, career-connected coursework, the opportunity to earn Industry Based Certifications (IBCs), and exposure to instructors with real-world experience in their fields. These programs prompt students’ career exploration while equipping them with tangible skills and credentials that have immediate value. Many of these pathways are intentionally aligned to local workforce demands, ensuring students are prepared for relevant, accessible opportunities close to home. In addition, every school highlighted the importance of partnerships with intermediary organizations like [Genesys Works](#) or the [East End Chamber of Commerce](#), which provide students with professional skills training, paid internships, and direct connection to employers, further strengthening the bridge between high school and the workforce.

“Our philosophy is that not everybody that comes through this program for four years is going to be a welder, but 100% of them are going to be employees somewhere. In addition to welding skills, we focus on employability skills, understanding [that some] employers want kids right out of high school.”
Pasadena Memorial High School CTE Instructor



Regardless of specific coursework offerings or pathways, the delivery of quality classroom instruction was emphasized at every campus. Educators prioritized flexible, personalized, and student-centered approaches, alongside blended (in-person and virtual) learning models, opportunities for self-paced progression, and emphasizing skill application and problem solving. Campus leaders consistently shared that instructional flexibility works best when paired with academic accountability, intrusive and proactive advising structures, and data-informed interventions to ensure that flexibility does not come at the expense of rigor.

When intentionally designed and implemented together, pathways and pedagogy give students direction and agency to navigate their unique academic journey, and ultimately, position them for success in college, career, and beyond.

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IB FOR ALL Lamar High School

What & How:

Almost every student on campus engages with the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum through the Diploma Programme or Career-related Programme, ensuring universal access to rigorous, globally recognized coursework.

The school structures its master schedule, advising systems, and instructional supports to make IB accessible to all students, rather than limiting it to a select cohort. This includes early exposure to IB-style learning, scaffolded coursework, targeted academic support, and aligned teacher training to ensure students are prepared to succeed.

Why It Matters:

Lamar has mastered democratizing access to rigorous coursework; their model challenges traditional academic gatekeeping and raises expectations for all students. Their IB for All model builds critical thinking, writing, and inquiry skills alongside college readiness, ultimately expanding opportunities for students who may not have otherwise seen themselves in advanced academic pathways.



ACCESSIBLE ACADEMICS: WEIGHTED LOTTERY + APPLICATION PROCESS

Alief Early College High School, Victory Early College High School

What & How:

These campuses utilize a weighted lottery admissions process, prioritizing enrollment for students who are historically underserved or identified as ‘at-risk’. Rather than solely selecting students based on academic performance, these campuses use an application and lottery that assigns additional weight to various student populations. This ensures equitable access for students, while maintaining transparency and fairness in admissions.

Why It Matters:

An accessible approach disrupts the traditional merit-based criteria used by many magnet schools, expanding access to rigorous, college-aligned opportunities to students who have historically been excluded. By intentionally prioritizing these student groups, campuses strive to close opportunity gaps and create more equitable pathways for all.

CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION (CTE) ADVISORY COUNCIL

Klein Forest High School

What & How:

CTE Advisory Councils are available at both the district- or campus-level and allow representatives from various industry sectors, higher education staff, community members, and parents to provide an informed viewpoint and expertise to inform CTE programs of study. These councils review CTE curriculum, resources, equipment, and facilities.

Why It Matters:

Advisory boards allow campus and district leaders to ensure CTE programs remain relevant and that graduates are prepared to immediately transition into the workforce or further their education through various certificate, two- or four-year pathways.

Pathways & Pedagogy

ACCELERATED BLOCK SCHEDULE

Kerr High School

What & How:

Kerr implements an accelerated block schedule paired with a strong advanced academics model, where students take four courses at a time and complete eight credits across each semester, with broad access to Advanced Placement (AP) and other rigorous coursework.

Courses are structured in quarter-long blocks, allowing students to complete classes at an accelerated pace and move on to additional or more advanced coursework mid-year. This flexible pacing enables students to double up on advanced classes over time, while the school's instructional model, including self-paced learning within subject-area centers, supports both acceleration as well as deep engagement with academic content.

Why It Matters:

This model maximizes academic instructional time and expands access to rigorous coursework, allowing more students to participate in advanced classes without overloading their schedules. It also develops students' time management, independence, and college-like learning habits, better preparing them for the pace and expectations of a postsecondary education.

COMPREHENSIVE CAMPUS: SCHOOL-WITHIN-A-SCHOOL MODEL

Westside High School, Pasadena Memorial High School

What & How:

These campuses offer a range of specialized academic and career pathways within a large, comprehensive high school setting. Students can pursue early college/ dual enrollment, CTE pathways, and/or AP coursework, all while having the opportunity to participate in robust athletics, arts, and extracurricular programming.

These schools organize students into pathway-aligned learning communities, allowing students to engage in focused, interest-driven coursework, while still accessing the full breadth of a traditional high school experience. This model blends the benefits of smaller, specialized academies with the resources, programs, and social opportunities of a large school campus.

Why It Matters:

This approach allows students to explore and develop career and academic interests in a meaningful way without sacrificing access to extracurriculars, school spirit, and diverse peer interactions. By embedding specialized pathways within a comprehensive school, campuses can offer both depth and breadth: supporting student engagement, identity development, and more informed postsecondary decision making.

A photograph of a chemistry laboratory with students working at lab benches. In the foreground, a female student with long dark hair and colorful safety goggles looks down at a rack of glassware containing test tubes and a red rubber bulb. To her right, another female student with safety goggles looks on. In the background, another student is visible at a lab bench. The lab has white cabinets and a sink area. An orange semi-transparent overlay covers the bottom half of the image, where the text is located.

Personnel & Protocol:

The Systems that Make
Pathways to Possible

Personnel & Protocol: The Systems that Make Pathways to Possible

What tied the people, place, pathways, and pedagogy together on every campus was personnel and protocol—**the right people in the right roles, designing and executing programs, supported by systems designed to sustain success.** These elements do not exist separately from a meaningful student experience; rather, they make it possible. On every campus we visited, well-connected systems served as the glue holding student success together and ensured practices were effective and enduring.

Effective school leaders do more than just set the vision; they translate it into structures staff can execute consistently. Many campus leaders emphasized the importance of recruiting teachers who are not just content experts, but also adaptable, collaborative, and committed to continuous improvement. At YES Prep Southeast, that clarity begins immediately in the hiring process:

“Being very clear with values you’re looking for, skills you’re willing to develop, and the mindsets you will not work with, allows you to bring the right people into the work with you.”

YES Prep Southeast Leader

Staff development is equally critical once educators are on campus. HSPS campuses consistently invest in ongoing professional learning through dedicated time for curriculum design, analysis of student data, and teacher collaboration across grade and content levels. Several campuses also built targeted support for newer educators, through structured onboarding and cohort-based mentorship. A Lamar High School dean described how this works:

“Twice a month we meet with new teachers: once for those new to the profession, and once for anyone who is new to the school. They’re getting introduced to our culture and revisiting our end goal. We push the use of our chosen research-based instructional tools, Kagan Cooperative Learning and Making Learning Visible, so we’re on the same page.”

Lamar High School Dean

These staffing strategies are reinforced by clear systems and accountability structures including early-warning systems to identify struggling students, visual tools and data “walls” to track student progress schoolwide, and campus-wide intervention protocols. Rather than existing solely as compliance measures, these tools help leaders translate data into timely decisions that benefit students. At C.E. King High School, campus administrators meet weekly to discuss student progression towards graduation requirements alongside if they’ve met CCMR criteria to provide targeted intervention. An administrator shared the value of this practice, from a tactical and relational standpoint:

“We’re constantly updating this data, because this tells us how our kids are doing and how we’re improving. It’s not just about the individual number, it’s about us as a school. Are we being successful? And then if we’re not being successful, we break it down to the individual students. [We ask] does the house counselor have a plan with them? If so, then we’ll talk about those individual kids. And so just making sure that, yes, we’ve got the data, but let’s look at what’s behind the data, and that’s our kids.”

C.E. King High School Administrator

Personnel & Protocol

Taken together, strong personnel and protocol do more than maintain a sense of order, they create opportunity. They allow schools to scale what works—expanding access to rigorous coursework, deepening community partnerships, and developing new student experiences—

while providing staff the structures they need for collaboration and shared ownership. In this way, systems act as the connective tissue, aligning leadership, instruction, and student support into one unified effort across campus.

STAFFING PRIORITY: ACADEMIC COACH Kerr High School

What & How:

The Kerr staffing structure includes an “Academic Coach” position, a role completely dedicated to supporting both teachers and students in navigating the school’s accelerated, self-paced learning model. The coach works closely with teachers to actively refine instructional practices and monitor student progress, while also providing targeted interventions for struggling students and prioritizing the development of executive functioning skills.

Why It Matters:

In a school model that prioritizes student autonomy and acceleration, the Academic Coach role provides the structure and support needed to maintain rigor and prevent students from falling behind or through the cracks. By bridging instruction and student support, this role helps sustain high expectations for all, while ensuring students and teachers have the guidance needed to succeed.

STRONG HIRING PHILOSOPHY + VISION FOR SUCCESS YES Prep Southeast Secondary

What & How:

This campus prioritizes a strong hiring philosophy grounded in a clear vision for success, seeking educators who embody the “villager mindset”, a deep commitment to supporting students holistically. School leaders intentionally recruit staff who not only have strong subject expertise, but are also aligned to the schools’ mission and understand the lived experiences of their students.

Their hiring philosophy includes hiring individuals from similar backgrounds, communities, or those with prior experience working with first-generation students. During the hiring process, leaders emphasize the importance of the values, mindset, and willingness to engage in demanding, relationship-centered work, ensuring staff are prepared for and committed to supporting student success.

Why It Matters:

Working with underserved students requires more than strong teaching skills, it demands empathy, persistence, and a belief in the transformative power of education. Through hiring staff who are aligned to this vision and see themselves as part of the collective, this campus demonstrates the power of developing more meaningful relationships and stronger support systems to achieve more impactful outcomes.



STAFFING PRIORITY: ADDITIONAL COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Lamar High School

What & How:

This campus prioritizes robust college advising by staffing their “College Corner” with additional college counselors and intentionally maintaining low caseloads. The administration allocates funding to expand their counseling team beyond the minimum to ensure students have consistent, individualized college guidance. With reduced caseloads, counselors are able to engage students earlier in their journey and are more accessible to students.

Why It Matters:

Lower caseloads allow counselors to build stronger relationships with students and provide more personalized, proactive guidance throughout the process. This is especially critical for first-generation students, who may require more intensive support to navigate complex systems.

CAREER-CONNECTED LEARNING

C.E. King High School

What & How:

C.E. King’s Public Service Leaders Academy has developed strong community partnerships to support its career-connected learning programs, linking students directly with professionals and institutions in the local community.

Through hosting guest speakers, hands-on simulations, mentorship, competitions, and other exposure to the career pathways, students engage directly with professionals from the local police department, Department of Justice, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These partnerships ensure students consistently have access to authentic learning opportunities throughout high school.

Why It Matters:

These partnerships bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world application, deepening student engagement and helping them envision themselves in various career fields. By providing early career exposure and direct connections, schools strengthen the pathway to postsecondary alignment, and cultivate the next generation of skilled professionals.

Personnel & Protocol

TARGETED ACADEMIC PROGRESS MONITORING Alief Early College High School

What & How:

This campus has codified a student academic progress monitoring system, including early-alert protocols that identify and support students at risk of falling behind on dual-credit coursework.

When a student's GPA falls to a 2.5, they are automatically placed on academic probation, triggering a set of structured interventions including assigned study time, restricted campus movement (limiting the typical flexibility between the high school and community college campus), and increased oversight from staff. In addition, the school established an early alert system with Houston City College (HCC), ensuring real-time communication occurs so high school staff are immediately notified when students struggle in their college courses.

Why It Matters:

Dual-credit courses introduce students to college-level expectations, but without strong monitoring systems, students can quickly fall off track. By intervening early and coordinating closely with postsecondary partners, campus leaders ensure students receive timely, targeted support, improving course completion and college readiness.

VISION-ALIGNED LEADERSHIP

Early College T-STEM Academy

What & How:

Rather than operating in silos, campus leadership across entities work to build a cohesive, student-centered system that integrates academic programming, wraparound support, and exposure to career pathways.

This alignment is driven by leadership that actively builds capacity, relationships, and systems across stakeholders. The school is embedded within a non-profit network, but continuously engages external organizations and advocacy groups to strengthen their programming. Campus leaders maintain tight internal systems: student tracking, teacher development, and program implementation to ensure consistency.

Why It Matters:

When leadership is aligned and anchored to a student-centered vision, it enables campuses to simultaneously address barriers (e.g., poverty, instability), expand opportunities (e.g., dual credit, certifications, partnerships), and sustain student progress over time.



Policies, Recommendations, & Implications

Policies, Recommendations, & Implications

Student success is not the result of any single program or intervention, rather, it emerges from interconnected systems that reinforce one another over time. People, pathways, pedagogy, personnel, and protocol do not operate in isolation; improving postsecondary outcomes depends on building the conditions for these elements to coexist and strengthen one another across campuses.

Translating what works into scalable strategies, requires investment in educator development, strengthening advising and pathway alignment, expanding access to rigorous coursework and CTE, and ensuring wraparound supports exist throughout the entire student experience. Policies must provide schools with flexibility to innovate, while maintaining clear accountability standards for student outcomes. Sustained progress depends on collaboration between school districts, community partners, higher education institutions, policymakers, and families to ensure efforts remain responsive to student needs and aligned to the local economic realities. Through elevating what works and creating shared definitions of effective practices, we collectively can support pathways to possible.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

Policy either enables or constrains the development of pathways to possible. Policymakers should protect and invest in funding models that support whole-child approaches, including wraparound services, academic advising, and mental health supports. Accountability systems should be further strengthened to reflect postsecondary outcomes, such as college and career readiness indicators tied to the CCMR Outcomes Bonus, not just graduation rates, to ensure students are adequately prepared for meaningful next steps. Policies that incentivize dual-credit access, like partnerships with local community colleges, and meaningful industry relationships that directly support campus CTE programs, will ensure more students graduate with credentials and clear steps towards their career pathways. Flexibility in implementation must be paired alongside strong, outcomes-based accountability.

FOR SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS

Districts are central to creating the infrastructure that enables schools to succeed. This means investing in coherent pathway design, strengthening advising systems, and ensuring equitable access to advanced coursework for all students. District leaders should prioritize staffing stability through high-quality professional learning, support for new teacher cohorts, and incentive structures that retain strong educators. When districts create the right conditions, school leaders can feel empowered to implement flexible scheduling, innovative staffing models, and strong instructional design aligned with clear expectations, in service of student outcomes.

FOR INDUSTRY PARTNERS

Employers and industry leaders play a critical role in making career-connected learning opportunities accessible to more students, like directly supporting [Career and Technical Student Organizations \(CTSOs\)](#) and their skills competitions, or internships through structured programs like Genesys Works. This includes deepening partnerships with schools to co-design CTE programs aligned to local workforce needs, offering internships, job shadowing, and mentorship opportunities, while providing real-world insight into evolving skill demands. Industry partners can support the sustainability of these pathways to possible through investing in equipment, certifications, and experiential learning opportunities that schools cannot fund alone. By actively engaging with local high school campuses, employers not only equip students to meaningfully contribute to company projects, they ensure students are prepared for the workforce and to be active members of their communities, driving Houston's long-term economic growth.

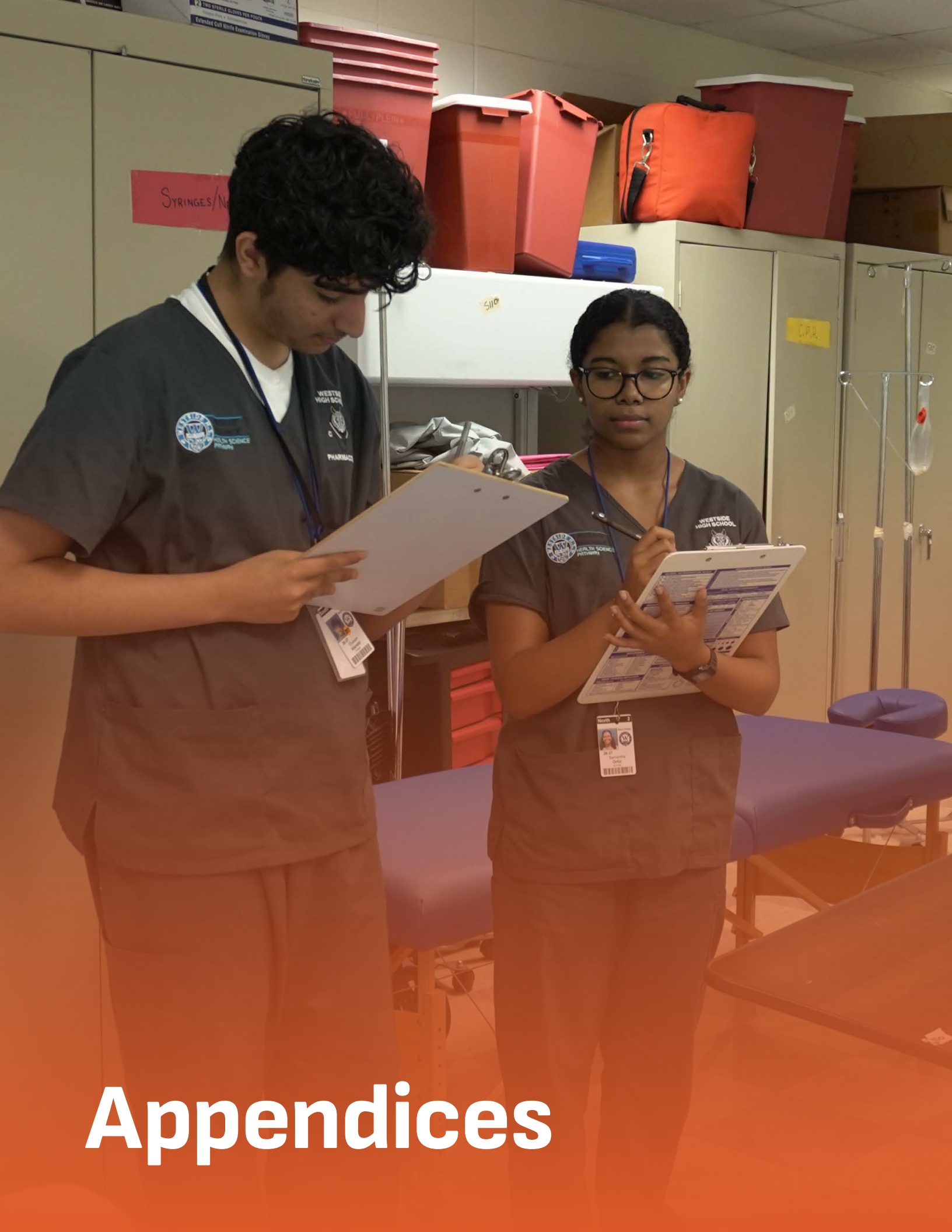
Conclusion

Houston's 700,000 students deserve more than incremental progress in postsecondary outcomes. They deserve a commitment of coordinated action from school and district leaders, policymakers, families, and industry partners. The schools highlighted in our research show clear evidence: aligned relationships, structures, and systems are crucial to create **Pathways to Possible**.

What challenge remains is the collective will to scale the right conditions for our students.

Through aligning policies, strengthening district infrastructure, and deepening community partnerships we can ensure students from every zip code have a meaningful pathway to possible. The charge needed for success requires each of us to build educational systems worthy of Houston's ambition, guaranteeing all students are not only prepared for the future, but equipped to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their communities, the workforce, and local economy. The work ahead is clear, the moment is now, and [the gaps we close](#) today will define Houston's prosperity for generations to come.





Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms

AP (Advanced Placement): College-level courses and exams offered to high school students through the College Board. A score of 3 or higher on an AP exam may qualify for college credit.

CCMR (College, Career, and Military Readiness): Texas' framework for measuring how prepared high school graduates are for life after graduation, used as part of the state's school accountability system.

CTE (Career and Technical Education): Programs that prepare students for specific careers through industry-aligned coursework and hands-on training.

Dual Enrollment/Dual Credit: Courses in which high school students earn both high school and college credit simultaneously.

IB (International Baccalaureate): A rigorous international curriculum framework available at participating high schools. A score of 4 or higher on an IB exam may qualify for college credit.

IBC (Industry-Based Certification): A credential earned by completing an industry-recognized certification exam, often connected to CTE coursework.

Living Wage: Earnings sufficient to cover basic living expenses. The living wage for a single-earner household with no dependents in Harris County is \$42,158, annually.

TSI (Texas Success Initiative): A state assessment used to determine college readiness in reading, writing, and math for students entering Texas public colleges and universities.

Appendix B: Selected Data and Methodology

This appendix summarizes key data and methods. Our full methodology and interview protocol can be found [here](#).

CAMPUS IDENTIFICATION METHODOLOGY

Using University of Houston Education Research Center (ERC) data, the Good Reason Houston team examined campus-level postsecondary outcomes and demographic characteristics, to identify campuses serving high proportions of Black, Hispanic, Emergent Bilingual (EB), and/or Economically Disadvantaged students, and exceeding regional averages in postsecondary enrollment, completion, and/or living wage attainment among graduates.

In addition to campuses' demographic profiles and outcomes, we also identified campuses from various school districts, school types (including neighborhood schools, charter campuses, magnet programs and early college high schools), and academic models, to ensure a variety of perspectives, practices, and contexts were represented.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY AND CODING FRAMEWORK

Purpose

The qualitative component of the HSPS project was designed to identify, describe, and interpret the school-level practices, structures, and conditions that appear to support strong postsecondary outcomes for Houston-region students. The study focused on three core questions: what are schools doing to support postsecondary success, how are those strategies implemented, and which of these strategies are transferable to other schools across Houston?

Design

The Good Reason Houston team conducted campus site visits, meeting with a variety of campus leaders, including administrators, counselors, advisors, and teachers. Qualitative data collection methods included: semi structured interviews, campus tours, artifact collection (flyers, brochures, etc.), observations of classrooms and advising sessions, reviewing visit notes, and facilitating summary debriefs to organize impressions and themes.

This approach equipped us to better understand what participants felt was unique, innovative, or important in their campus context and how they cultivate student success.

Analytic Approach

Interviews and other data collected were analyzed in Dedoose using inductive thematic coding informed by the original study protocol. Our analysis resulted in grouping findings into six thematic areas:

- **School Context and Vision:** How campus philosophy, culture, and school models support postsecondary success.
- **Key Practices and Structures:** How campus practices, coursework, programs, and partnerships support that vision.
- **On-Campus Relationships:** How strong relationships between various individuals (students and staff, campus administration and teachers, etc.) play a role in promoting student success.
- **Personnel Practices:** How campus personnel structures, decisions, and hiring philosophy support postsecondary success.
- **Equity, Access, and Belonging:** How campus culture promotes postsecondary success and holistic student support, and how staff promote equal access to opportunities on campus.
- **Family & Community Engagement:** How staff engage families and other community members in promoting students' postsecondary success.

See Qualitative
Research Methods and
Interview Protocol



Data & Methodology

CAMPUS IDENTIFICATION METHODOLOGY

Using University of Houston Education Research Center (ERC) data, Good Reason Houston and January Advisors partnered to examine campus demographic characteristics, including the proportion of Black, Hispanic, Emergent Bilingual (EB), and economically disadvantaged students. We conducted statistical clustering on demographic and campus postsecondary outcomes for high school graduates, including postsecondary enrollment, completion, and living wage attainment.

Our goal in using clustering to help categorize and select schools for qualitative research was threefold: 1) Highlight campuses serving student populations that have historically not been provided with the opportunities to excel in their postsecondary outcomes relative to more advantaged peers; 2) Identify campuses exceeding region averages in key postsecondary outcomes metrics and setting students up for long-term success; and 3) Select campuses from various school districts, school types (including neighborhood schools, charter campuses, magnet programs and early college high schools), and academic models, to ensure a variety of perspectives, practices, and contexts were represented. From five clusters, 13 schools were selected and 10 ultimately chose to participate. An overview of the quantitative methodology is [here](#).

High School Graduating Class of 2017 Data

The High School for Postsecondary Success project was developed using the most recent ERC data, as of January 2026. We used six years post-high school graduation as our baseline in alignment with federal graduation rate reporting standards, which give a more complete picture of time-to-degree for students enrolling in a postsecondary program.

Demographic data reflects the campus population from the 2016-17 school year.

	Postsecondary Research Data ¹				TAPR Campus-Level Student Information Data ²			
High School	# of HS Grads	Postsecondary Enrollment	Postsecondary Degree Completion	Living Wage Attainment	Black Students	Hispanic Students	Economically Disadvantaged (EcoDis) Students	Emergent Bilingual (EB) Students
HOUSTON REGION	36,567	64%	27%	20%	21%	60%	71%	28%
Alief Early College High School	87	83%	54%	24%	20%	57%	90%	15%
C.E. King High School	328	61%	23%	21%	25%	68%	91%	14%
Early College T-STEM Academy	41	59%	32%	20%	0%	100%	100%	14%
Kerr High School	124	77%	59%	33%	9%	24%	79%	6%
Klein Forest High School	639	57%	19%	17%	27%	56%	89%	21%
Lamar High School	464	67%	28%	19%	30%	39%	64%	11%
Pasadena Memorial High School	585	63%	24%	27%	3%	84%	77%	11%
Westside High School	523	59%	24%	20%	32%	38%	71%	14%
Victory Early College High School	87	92%	84%	37%	16%	77%	100%	5%
YES Prep Southeast Secondary	70	84%	41%	29%	2%	97%	88%	6%

¹Postsecondary Research Report
²Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR): Enrollment Data

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY AND CODING FRAMEWORK

Purpose

The qualitative component of the HSPS project was designed to identify, describe, and interpret the school-level practices, structures, and conditions that support strong postsecondary outcomes for Houston region students. In keeping with the project protocol, the study focused on the following core questions: what are schools doing to support postsecondary success, how are those strategies implemented, and how can strategies be transferable to other schools across Houston?

Design

This study utilized a multi-site qualitative descriptive study with cross-case comparison to generate insight into how selected schools organize their academic, advising, and support systems in ways that contribute to stronger outcomes in college, career, and credential attainment. The qualitative design included multiple forms of evidence collected during school visits including: semi structured interviews with administrators, counselors, and other relevant staff; campus tours and artifacts (flyers, brochures, etc.); observations of classrooms and advising sessions; and visit notes and summary debriefs documenting impressions and themes. This approach allowed the team to understand both what participants say about their school model and what is observable in practice, including school culture, student engagement, and visible structures of support.

Analytic Approach

Analysis was conducted in Dedoose using an inductive thematic coding process informed by the study protocol. Although the process is inductive in orientation, it was not unstructured; the interview and observation protocols created pre-identified important areas of inquiry, including: school vision, key practices, advising, social-emotional supports, leadership, equity, family engagement, partnerships, and culture. These domains served as broad organizing categories, while the specific codes and themes within them emerged from the data.

Researchers chose this approach because the project sought to identify promising practices and patterns across schools without forcing findings into a rigid prescriptive framework. We prioritized an analytical approach that could yield unexpected insights, especially where schools described innovative practices, tensions, tradeoffs, or context-specific adaptations that could not be captured by the protocol alone.

HSPS CAMPUS VISIT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Personal Background Questions

- How long have you been working at this school? The district? Education in general?
- What positions have you held over time?
- What do you believe is the role of your school in supporting students to achieve postsecondary success?
- What do you believe is your role within that?

Section A: School Context & Vision (All Roles)

- In your own words, how would you define your school's mission/vision related to postsecondary success?
 - **Probe:** How explicitly is this focus communicated to staff, students, and families?
- What approaches to postsecondary preparation does your school take that makes you unique/innovative?
- Which elements do you feel like any school leader could implement across Houston or the state?
 - **Probe:** Was this model intentionally designed, or did it evolve over time?
- Who are the students you primarily serve, and how does your model respond to their specific needs, strengths, or aspirations?

Section B: Key Practices & Structures (All Roles)

- What are the most important practices, programs, or structures that contribute to strong postsecondary outcomes for your students?
 - **Examples:** College visits (to colleges), admission counselor visits (they come to school), college fairs, career/major exploration opportunities, etc.
 - **Probe:** Which of these feel most essential versus nice-to-have?
 - **Probe:** What is your perception of how the students engage with the opportunities provided?
 - **Probe:** What are career readiness programs or structures that support students not planning for traditional college?
- Can you walk me through a student's experience—from entering your school to graduation—in terms of postsecondary preparation? How would you describe or define the 'portrait of a successful graduate'?
- How do academics, advising, and social-emotional supports work together at your school?

- **Examples:** How would a student who is struggling academically be supported if they want to pursue college vs. a student who is academically strong and wants to go to college vs. feeling uncertain about post grad plans?
- **Probe:** Where do you see the strongest alignment across these areas?

Section C (I): Role Dependent Administrators, Leaders, Teachers

- **All:** How do classroom instruction and learning experiences prepare students for the expectations of college or careers?
 - **Probe:** Rigor, independence, collaboration, writing, problem-solving
- **Admin:** How do teachers communicate high expectations while also providing appropriate support and guidance based on student need?
- **Teacher:** What subject and grade level do you teach? Do you hold any other roles in the school community?
 - **Probe:** What do interventions look like to determine academic readiness and address the different "college, career, and military" readiness indicators?

Section C (II): Role Dependent - Counselors & Advisors

- How do you balance academic advising, postsecondary planning, and social-emotional support?
- How does your counseling role here differ from what you've seen in more traditional high schools?
- How is college and career advising structured at your school?
 - **Probe:** Dedicated advisors, advisory periods, integration with coursework
 - **Probe:** what is the topical information covered? I.e. "meet with counselor" - how often? What is discussed?
- What does collaboration or partnership with external organizations look like on your campus?
 - **Probe [examples]:** Advise TX, Breakthrough, Momentum, EMERGE, DiscoverU, healthcare, local CC
- At what point do students begin postsecondary planning, and how does it evolve over time?

Section E: Equity, Access & Belonging

- How do you cultivate a campus culture or environment that encourages a student to think about or explore postsecondary pathways on your campus?
- How do you ensure postsecondary opportunities are equitable and accessible to all students?
 - **Probe:** First-generation students, low-income students, multilingual learners, students with disabilities
- What barriers do students most commonly face in pursuing postsecondary options, and how does your school address them?
- How do you help students build confidence that they belong in college or career spaces beyond high school?

Section F. Family & Community Engagement

- How do you engage families or caregivers in postsecondary planning? What does effective engagement look like? in helping families understand postsecondary options and requirements?
 - **Probe:** Language access, trust-building, financial conversations
 - **Probe:** What challenges do you encounter in engaging your school community around postsecondary pathways and how do you address them?

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