

THE DATA THAT MATTER AND THE PLANS THAT WORK:

New Districtwide Approaches to
Student Success Beyond High School



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WRITERS & CONTRIBUTORS

Bill DeBaun

Director of Data and Evaluation

Kelly Mae Ross


Communications Manager

OUR MISSION IS TO BUILD, STRENGTHEN, AND EMPOWER COMMUNITIES AND STAKEHOLDERS TO CLOSE EQUITY GAPS IN POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT FOR ALL STUDENTS.

NATIONAL COLLEGE
ATTAINMENT NETWORK

1001 CONNECTICUT AVENUE, NW,
SUITE 300
WASHINGTON, DC 20036

WWW.NCAN.ORG



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THE DATA THAT MATTER AND THE PLANS THAT WORK:

New Districtwide Approaches to Student Success Beyond High School

EACH YEAR, district and school leaders, teachers, staff, and other stakeholders watch students walk across the stage at high school commencements across the country. These momentous events represent the culmination of the K-12 education experience and a turning point for students as they advance toward various postsecondary pathways. To better understand those pathways, whether they be college, career, the military, or something else, many districts and schools distribute senior exit surveys to their graduating students. Too often, unfortunately, students report optimistic plans that change or fail to materialize. By then the K-12 system has turned its attention to the next academic year and a new class of seniors needing support for its postsecondary decisions.

The real data on students' postsecondary outcomes are affordable, accessible, and unfortunately underutilized. If harnessed for advising high school students before graduation, these data could significantly change the approach to preparing students for college and career success across the country.

Pointing to the fallibility of senior exit surveys, Dr. Nicole Hurd, founder and CEO of the College Advising Corps, says, "The most awkward conversation I've had, and the most heartbreaking, has been determining baseline data as we begin to partner with a school." She continues in Richard Whitmire's "The B.A. Breakthrough":

Ideally, we are able to collect [National Student Clearinghouse] data for three years to establish a baseline and then measure impact. A couple of times, I've had the awkward situation of sharing with a principal or team of educators the NSC data for the first time and it was lower than they anticipated. Unfortunately, schools often use self-reported data. For example, there may be an end-of-the-year survey where they say 'How many of our students are going to college?' And the students raise their hands and then the school may record as many as 90 percent of their students are going to college. But then you see the NSC data and it may be as low as 50 percent who actually enrolled, and they look stunned.

Data from the RAND American School Leader Panel back up Hurd's experience. This nationally representative survey of school leaders asks respondents a wide variety of questions about policy and practice. A recent release found that about a third of school leaders reported no access to student-level data on postsecondary enrollment, and about half (46%) reported no goals around student college enrollment. The percentage reporting no goals around the graduation rates of the colleges to which students enroll (58%) or around college fit and match (79%) were even higher.¹

The lack of access and/or attention to those data by school leaders has consequences for students, communities, states, and the nation as a whole. The [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's High School Benchmarks Report 2019](#) finds a 14 percentage-point gap in the enrollment rates following high school graduation of students from low- and higher-income high schools (55% to 69%). For students from low- and high-minority high schools, that gap is 11 percentage points (58% to 69%).² Six years after high school graduation, the completion numbers are starker. Just 27% of students from the class of 2012 who graduated from low-income high schools completed a college degree six years later, compared to 47% of students who graduated from higher-income high schools. Comparing students from high-poverty high schools (where more than 75% of students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch) to low-poverty schools (where less than 25% of students were eligible), there was a 32 percentage-point gap in postsecondary completion (21% to 53%).³

The numbers paint a startling picture that many of those commencement attendees would not or could not imagine as students walk across the stage. Given the critical importance of having at least some postsecondary experience in the modern economy (to say nothing of the non-pecuniary benefit), paying attention to these data, and acting on them, is exceptionally important for the K-12 sector.

How can we get more leaders and stakeholders to access and use these postsecondary outcomes data? How can and should practices change to better prepare students for college and career? How can we change the way school districts approach postsecondary advising?

These questions marked the beginning of a conversation in spring 2018 that found National College Attainment Network (NCAN) staff members wondering how to accelerate the adoption of knowledge and practices from the college access field into K-12 school districts. It seems like a daunting task to change practice at the school district level; even the smallest districts' trajectories seem to shift slowly, let alone the behemoths across the country graduating tens of thousands of students each year into a wide variety of postsecondary pathways. That slow pace occurs for a variety of reasons, including, for example, district capacity constraints and other mandates that demand their attention.

Despite these barriers, the theory went, investing in a few discrete levers in a short period of time might turn up best practices, new innovations, and important insights about where the process of changing the business of high school postsecondary advising could succeed and fail under pressure testing.

The To & Through Advising Challenge kicked off in NCAN's conference room that day. At the time of this writing, the 20 grantee organizations that received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to participate in the Challenge are in their second academic year and implementing ambitious plans to change how they support and prepare students for their lives after high school.

THE CHALLENGE PLACES ITS BETS ON FOUR KEY PRACTICES:

1. Incorporating postsecondary fit and match knowledge strategies into college counseling.
2. Increasing access to financial aid by spurring Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion and reducing the effects of verification.
3. Ensuring students matriculate by mitigating the summer melt phenomenon.
4. Accomplishing the previous three tasks through a data-driven lens and the development of new processes for data analysis and usage.

After a competitive selection process, 20 grantees, a combination of school districts and school-district-adjacent organizations, emerged. These organizations received direct financial support (\$90,000 over two years), intensive postsecondary advising and data coaching from professionals in the field, professional development opportunities at learning communities and NCAN's national conference, and technical assistance from NCAN staff. During the 2018-19 academic year, each organization developed an implementation plan to put into place starting with the 2019-20 academic year.

The To & Through Advising Challenge was (and continues to be) an ambitious project with concrete goals not just for individual school districts and partner organizations but also for building knowledge more broadly. In large part, the Challenge has been successful to date, and where it has stumbled NCAN learned valuable lessons. Even now, just 18 months in, the project has provided a host of valuable insights about enabling conditions in K-12 school districts that are key for shifting postsecondary practices. These insights come above and beyond each organization's individual efforts around changing their own practices and have often come through qualitative analysis of organizations' needs and views at key junctures throughout the academic year.

There are many approaches to changing the way school districts can improve students' postsecondary outcomes. This brief offers up even more insights and lessons from five of the organizations: Jefferson County (Alabama) Schools, the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, Broward County Public Schools (Florida), AchieveMpls (Minnesota), and Sacramento City (California) Unified School District. Rather than try to capture the entirety of their experience or practice here, each profile centers around one big idea, including steps for replicating elsewhere if feasible, and provides additional context from organizations' coaches, highlights other key practices in which the organizations are engaging, and offers the organization's insights into some big questions they faced during this process.

THE FIVE BIG IDEAS ARE:

1. Ground stakeholder engagement (especially among students) and changes to practice and curriculum within a communitywide communications campaign around changing perceptions of what college is and can be.
2. Harness the power of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data to create counselor resources and strategies for improving postsecondary fit and match for students.
3. Add specialized personnel and use peer mentoring to assist school counselors and improve students' postsecondary outcomes.
4. Leverage the partnership of a college access program to provide districtwide support.
5. Employ letters to inform students and families about their best fit postsecondary options.

Although the five organizations included here vary widely in terms of approach to this work, there was substantial convergence around some important themes and enabling conditions for the work. Some of these include:

- **Data can be key to changing minds.** A common refrain across interviews was that seeing data from the National Student Clearinghouse on students' postsecondary outcomes was a wake-up call. NCAN saw a similar phenomenon in grantees' reporting over the past 18 months. Accessing those data through the StudentTracker for High School service is relatively easy (and seeing the top-line numbers is critical for school-based staff and district leaders), but diving deeper is more difficult. Effective use of the NSC StudentTracker system requires at least three discrete skills from an analyst: building a submission file, cleaning and analyzing a detail file, and reporting analysis in a way that makes sense to district- and school-level stakeholders. Districts should keep that in mind when building their data capacity.
- **Treat this work like a campaign.** The idea that efforts to improve postsecondary outcomes are as much about messaging as practice came up often across interviews for this brief. Changing practice is important but not as important as helping stakeholders up and down the system feel that they are pulling in the same direction toward a critical goal. Karlo Silbiger, coordinator of college-going culture at the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, summed it up this way: "When I was hired, I was told, 'We are running a campaign here.' This is not a program. This is a campaign to change people's minds and values. ... Everyone who works in schools does it because they want a better life for students and people in communities. We need to tie in that belief with the idea that college access and success is the key to that. ... Anything that had to do with college was an opportunity to change people's minds about what was so important."
- **Do not assume stakeholders know what you mean.** This is closely connected with the above in terms of messaging, but terminology matters tremendously to stakeholders, and they are seldom in agreement about what it means. Talking about "college" might give some stakeholders the idea that the work focuses on four-year, campus-based postsecondary education even if the work is inclusive of preparing or advising students for community college or a credential and career pathway. Misunderstandings around messaging and intent can ground these efforts before they even have a chance to gain momentum. Do the work up front to understand people's concerns and motives to make the way smoother to change policies and practices.

- **Be intentional about bringing people together.** Rather than the “make sure everyone has a seat at the table!” advice that often appears in these kinds of publications (it’s good advice), this is more about making sure that there is a table and people around it at all. Because students’ postsecondary outcomes too often take a backseat in school districts, without regular check-ins and progress reporting it is a fraught assumption that offices and personnel are advancing the work around those outcomes.

NCAN looks forward to sharing additional insights from this project in future publications. Until then, here are some concrete steps that school districts (and school-district-adjacent stakeholders like community-based organizations) can take to begin changing the way they do business around postsecondary advising:

1. Make sure you have access to data from the National Student Clearinghouse and a plan for cleaning it up and disseminating it to principals, counselors, and other postsecondary advisers.
2. Inventory the resources that might already exist internally for conducting this work. This includes curriculum, events and communications channels for disseminating resources to students and families, and practices around key processes like FAFSA completion.
3. Build a broad coalition of interested parties and be expansive about who those parties might be. More stakeholders than you might realize have a hand in students’ eventual postsecondary outcomes, and even more might be interested in getting involved. Look beyond the walls of the school and district to see who can lend a hand.
4. Establish early on what you want to do in this area and how you want to talk about it.
5. Set your efforts up for success by securing achievable and measurable goals and build from there. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and a school district’s postsecondary enrollment rate won’t rise overnight.

To some extent or another, each of the organizations below embraced these steps. Their big ideas have already started to change postsecondary advising and preparation for their students.



PROFILES IN INNOVATION:

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
IMPROVING POSTSECONDARY ADVISING



A photograph of three students in a classroom. A young woman with long dark hair, wearing a light blue shirt and a backpack, holds a green and white folder. She is smiling slightly. Behind her, a young woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a pink shirt, is looking down. To the right, a young man with glasses and a black shirt is also looking down. The background is a plain light-colored wall. The photo is partially obscured by a large orange diagonal shape on the left and a smaller orange square on the right.

JEFFERSON COUNTY SCHOOLS

ALABAMA

THE BIG IDEA:

Ground stakeholder engagement (especially among students) and changes to practice and curriculum within a communitywide communications campaign around changing perceptions of what college is and can be.

BACKGROUND:

Jefferson County is the second-largest school district in Alabama, serving more than 36,000 students annually across 57 schools (including 13 high schools and one International Baccalaureate school). During the 2018-19 academic year, 63% of students were economically disadvantaged, 10% were Hispanic, 48% were White, and 50% were Black or African American.

BIG QUESTIONS:

Q: How has the use of data helped to get buy-in from stakeholders in the district?

A: The Clearinghouse data let us know how many students are leaving and going to college, persisting, and/or completing a degree. The data showed us that 71% of our students come right back to our community. Knowing we're building our future neighbors has been rewarding. – Cynthia Cates, school counseling and assessment specialist, Jefferson County Schools

Additionally, we can say, "Here's the data, you can't ignore it. When we present to people who have never heard of any of this, it is earth-shattering to a lot of them. Teachers ... know what they're doing at every grade level is ultimately going to lead up to the success of that child after they leave us. Making sure we're doing right while we do have them is the goal." – Whitlee Lusk, public relations supervisor, Jefferson County Schools

Q: How do you incentivize teachers and staff to get more involved in the postsecondary readiness work?

A: "For a counselor to be recognized for their knowledge does not happen often. ... It's a huge incentive to just be recognized as a counselor with expertise in an area. When you have an expertise, it's usually a passion for you, so to be able to offer it to more than the students at your school [through the JefCo Journey mobile app], is quite an incentive for a school counselor. ... People just want to be recognized, whether that's a certificate or to be recognized at a board meeting. ... It's little things that don't even cost money, just time and effort." – Cynthia Cates, school counseling and assessment specialist, Jefferson County Schools.

NARRATIVE:

"I think that having K-12 school districts think about postsecondary is very new. I don't know if you can say that about every state, but you can say it about the state of Alabama," says Whitlee Lusk, public relations supervisor at the Jefferson County Board of Education. "What we're doing is very cutting-edge." What they are doing is empowering every stakeholder connected to their schools: students, staff, families, community members, and beyond, to have a role in what they're calling "the JefCo Journey."

"There are some mindset shifts that are having to take place at all levels of leadership, from the district down to the schools about the responsibility for a child's postsecondary experience," says Lusk. "A lot of people might think, 'Oh, I just have to take care of them while they're here, and whatever happens after that is on them.'" Not so, says Lusk, who counters that "everyone has a responsibility from K through 12 to ensure a return on investment on the work."

The JefCo Journey aims to inspire students through "powerful postsecondary stories from district, school, and community stakeholders," according to an implementation plan going into effect during the 2019-20 academic year. It serves as an umbrella that includes pairing those stories with a new curriculum that teachers will deliver through schools' advisory periods and new tools like a mobile app that disseminates knowledge to students directly from the district's most experienced counselors.

A committee populated by the directors of all of the district's departments identified advisory periods as an underutilized resource. "We've had advisory for six or seven years, but it has never actually been followed through with completely," explains Cates. "We want to build a vocabulary around postsecondary education that is going to be incorporated into advisory. ... Because some students are getting certain things and some aren't, we are trying to make that experience more equal for our students," she adds. That process involves a dedicated "advisory makeover committee" that will align advisory's curriculum across the district rather than allowing schools to take disparate approaches. The committee was "shocked" to find how many resources were already available at the district level just waiting to be put to use in the new advisory effort.

Students from the district are currently working in conjunction with Blackboard to create, brand, and market a student-facing two-way mobile app. The app will be populated in part with videos from counselors with an area of strength on key college and career topics. The district asked counselors to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Where counselors have a strength – for example, how to complete the FAFSA – the app will display it in a how-to video. It gives each student access to a counselor with that strength.

“We want to create this app so that no matter where you are in the district or the strengths and weaknesses of your counselors, you will have access to up-to-date and accurate information in the app,” says Cates. “We want it to live there, and we want students to create the app.” Beyond contributing to the campaign, students will get the real-life experience of working on app development, coding, and marketing.

Another positive side effect of the app development is the district’s better understanding of where counselors identified needing more professional development, which should ultimately improve capacity. “Increasing that knowledge for our counselors always has the trickle-down effect of increasing knowledge for students,” says Cates.

Both of these strategies fold into the JefCo Journey branding, which the district is using both in the real world and on social media. The name is the district’s, but Cates and Lusk are firm: “The kids will brand it.” They see it as a way to authentically involve students: “We can sit around the table and talk as adults all day long,” says Lusk, “but for us to get to the core of the work, the best way is to have students work directly with us.”

STEPS FOR LAUNCHING THE JEFCO JOURNEY CAMPAIGN:

1. Create a form for postsecondary story submission.
2. Set up a schedule and budget for video production for stories; determine when stories they will be shown to personnel.
3. Launch the district campaign video series.
4. Facilitate school- and community-level videos in fall 2019; host a JEFCOEDTalks event to highlight powerful postsecondary stories from district, school, and community stakeholders.
5. Develop the app.
6. Implement the fully developed and revamped advisory program.



THE PARTNERSHIP FOR LOS ANGELES SCHOOLS

THE BIG IDEA:

Harness the power of National Student Clearinghouse data to create counselor resources and strategies for improving postsecondary fit and match for students.

BACKGROUND:

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (PLAS) formed in 2007 as a collaboration between the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the city of Los Angeles, founding donors Richard and Melanie Lundquist, and other entities both public and private. PLAS manages “18 of the most historically underserved schools in LA Unified,” which enroll about 14,000 students annually. Among those are five high schools whose graduation rates have doubled since joining the Partnership.

OTHER KEY STRATEGIES:

- **Create** a “College Acceptance Success Metric” as a more accurate best fit accountability system to replace “4-year college acceptance” as our organization’s primary institutional college-going goal.
- **Integrate** a new advising system across the network by grade level through college counseling practices, College Compass, and family programming.
- **Pilot** summer melt techniques with Partnership students to find best practices.

BIG QUESTIONS:

Q: How did this work get elevated so quickly?

A: First, we came in with a strong belief that this was a K-12 initiative. One of the mistakes that a lot of districts make is seeing this really as a high school initiative and not as a K-12 initiative. When you do that you cause two-thirds or more of the staff to see it as not related to their work. We have kids for 13 years within our system. That’s 13 years to get them successful for college, and what that meant is that team leads, peer coaches, and principals who work in elementary schools have been just as involved as those who work in high schools. Second, we positioned this as a value statement for the organization; we didn’t make assumptions that everybody believes four-year college success is important, but we went in with the belief that it was a pathway we wanted to push students to because it would increase their likelihood of success. - Karlo Silbiger, coordinator of college-going culture, Partnership for Los Angeles Schools.

Q: How did you respond to stakeholder pushback around your emphasis on college-going?

A: [It can be challenging] when you're comparing what's in your personal story to what's in the research. We'll present data on the income someone who goes to and graduates from college can earn, and someone will raise their hand and say, "My cousin is a plumber." Many of the people who struggled with the value we're trying to elevate is them thinking that we're trying to push a one-size-fits-all model and only supporting students going to four-year college and not to community college or the workforce or the military. We *are* going to [present all options], but we think a four-year college degree is helpful and want to educate students of the value of that and push them in that direction. - Karlo Silbiger, coordinator of college-going culture, Partnership for Los Angeles Schools.

NARRATIVE:

"When we got access to the NSC data, which we had never looked at before, we knew it had to get in front of everyone, not just middle schools and high schools but also elementary schools," says Karlo Silbiger, coordinator of college-going culture at the Partnership. "We created very easy-to-read college success data sheets. Giving out huge datasets wasn't going to work, but we wanted them to see how students from their school were doing." The eye-opening value of using NSC data is on full display at the Partnership. First, the Partnership is giving stakeholders in schools a glimpse at students' postsecondary outcomes, but beyond that a deeper dive is creating lists of colleges that will give students the best chance for success.

One of the Partnership's key strategies is to develop a common definition for and criteria of best fit schools. To do this, they took the following steps:

1. **Combed through the literature to find criteria that best align with college completion for first-generation and low-income students of color.**

2. **Met with partners and other college access organizations to hear about their criteria and systems.**

3. **Used NSC data to compare Partnership graduation rates from schools considered "best fit" based on the proposed criteria versus those not considered "best fit" to test efficacy/validity.**

4. Created a graphic tool that counselors can use to help students see college success rates.

5. Used research and feedback to create the draft criteria, which included two “best fit” lists as determined by the Partnership:
 - A. Schools with average admitted student GPAs above 3.5 with a 75% (or better) minority graduation rate.
 - B. A list of those schools with average admitted student GPAs under 3.5 with a 55% (or better) minority graduation rate.

6. Updated each list of schools with the most recent available data for use during the 2019-20 academic year.

7. Researched each school on the list to create individual data sheets to be shared with counselors, teachers, parents, and students interested in learning more about best fit schools.

“We’ve spent a year bringing data to every single staff member, teacher, school, and building,” says Silbiger. “That was to combat people’s preconceived notions; most people do not read data on college success. They were shocked. If we were going to really move the needle on college success, we were going to push four-year college as the important goal for our students because we knew they would be more likely to graduate. We have this mindset that we need to send students to schools where they’re most likely to graduate and get a degree.” This resource isn’t solely being put in front of counselors; it’s also being put in front of teachers and school leaders.

The Partnership is also putting the data in front of students and families. “College success data has been super helpful as we try to push our info to students and parents about institutions they’re thinking about attending. Again, that’s never been a part of the calculus. They’re asked to think about where the school is and the financial aid, but not the likelihood that they’re going to graduate. It has been an absolutely massive culture movement locally,” Silbiger noted.



BROWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

FLORIDA

THE BIG IDEA:

Add specialized personnel and use peer mentoring to assist school counselors and improve students' postsecondary outcomes.

BACKGROUND:

Broward County Public Schools is the second largest school system in Florida and the sixth largest in the United States. The district serves nearly 268,000 students across 241 schools (including 32 high schools). During the 2019-20 academic year, 66% of students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, 52% were White, 40% were Black and 36% were Hispanic.

OTHER KEY STRATEGIES:

- **Expand** upon existing NSC information through data sharing agreements with state colleges and universities to determine a profile of students' postsecondary enrollment; develop report cards with postsecondary key performance indicators for each secondary school to create accountability structures within the district's College, Career, and Life Readiness (CCLR) Strategic Plan.
- **Use** the millage referendum's additional funding to support the hiring of staff to improve student-to-counselor ratios.
- **Develop** a postsecondary advisement curriculum for "Personalization Period" teachers to assist students with goal setting and task completion as part of the Personalization for Academic and Social Learning (PASL) program.

BIG QUESTIONS:

Q: How has National Student Clearinghouse data changed the way you do business around postsecondary advising?

A: "It's important to know where we're starting. Our schools were starting with self-reported data about where students want to go. Our schools got a big wake up when they looked at NSC data, they saw 85-90% of students going to college [on their senior exit surveys]. They look at NSC reports, and it's sometimes 60% or less. I think it's important to see where we're starting and can't be blind to what's happening with our students. When you put that why in there it really opens up schools. They say, 'I thought 85-90% of my students were going to college but they're not. How do I make it better?'"

NARRATIVE:

In Broward County, Florida, school counselors are critical stakeholders delivering college, career, and life readiness (CCLR) supports, and they were (and are) overwhelmed. Broward County has approximately a 500:1 student-to-counselor ratio, but an informal analysis shows that 55% of counselors' time is spent on "other duties" like testing, 504 accommodations plans, study hall, etc., which makes that ratio effectively about 1,000:1.

To provide additional support, the district created the Broward Advisors for Continuing Education (BRACE) Advisors position, which serves as the support arm for counselors. These adult personnel assist with, for example, clerical supports, fee waivers, and college applications so counselors can focus on mental health and other components of their roles. Because counselors spend so much time completing other duties as assigned, the role of the BRACE Advisor has grown substantially, and that includes for CCLR. A BRACE Advisor in each school is responsible for CCLR-related activities. Some of these schools have as many as 4,800 students.

"In order to meet the demand of the masses, we had to raise an army of people to meet those needs," says Ralph Aiello, director of school counseling. "When you look around those school campuses, 95% of the people on those campuses are students, [so] we should leverage their strengths and altruism to influence the needs of their peers." The district recognizes that students tend to listen to each other far more than they listen to adults.

Although there are different mentoring and leadership programs across the district, in light of an existing relationship with PeerForward (an NCAN member), Broward County decided to create a program to focus exclusively on CCLR. Enter the BRACE Cadets. The To & Through Advising Challenge has helped to scale peer mentorship throughout the district by training these peer-mentor cadets on general campaign management and college and career readiness skills. The Cadets, in turn, go back to their schools to lead initiatives that help other students, for example, fill out the FAFSA. They also help co-host parent nights and co-run college fairs.

The district used a Title IV grant to get funding to pay these students. Being a BRACE Cadet is not just a volunteer opportunity; each Cadet receives a \$500 personal stipend to get engaged. During the first year of the project, there were 60 Cadets, but during the 2019-20 academic year that figure more than doubled. All 32 traditional high schools in the district have a BRACE Cadet, as do some technical college programs, including some charter schools. Some Cadets returned for a second year and are the veterans ("BRACE

Ambassadors”); they get an extra \$100 for the leadership role they are taking on. “On one hand, Cadets came about because there was a deficit that needed to be filled,” reflects Aiello. “But it was also already an existing strength for our students.”

The selection process to become a BRACE Cadet in Broward County is extensive. Applicants need to complete project plans, demonstrate their ability to use Naviance, and complete certain performance tasks in order to qualify. They then go through a round of interviews with a district-based coordinator (who is exclusively dedicated to Cadets and a part of the district’s CCLR team). Once selected, Cadets go through a multiday training that covers college and career information, Florida’s Bright Futures Scholarship Program, a FAFSA 101 module, college applications, and more. Cadets then create a project plan through an iterative process. The project plans cover a range of topics. Some focus on college and career readiness, scholarships, Naviance, resume development, and securing internships; some on targeted populations, like postsecondary pathways for students with special needs.

Once their plans are finalized, Cadets return to their schools and collaborate with their school counselor(s) and BRACE Advisors to actually implement that plan. The adults smooth the way in the process. For instance, if Cadets need to access the computer labs, the BRACE Advisor helps with that part of the plan. To communicate with students, Cadets are making ample use of social media. There is an entire group of BRACE Cadets focusing on Instagram, Twitter, and other platforms across the district. Many high schools have their own social media presence as well and personalize content to their school population. Even above and beyond the plan they developed on their own, the Cadet is often the support wing of the BRACE Advisor.

Ralph Aiello has learned a few lessons through this effort. First: “Start small. Find the coalition of the willing who have the same passion and dedication to this type of effort. Set some small goals with measurable outcomes that can demonstrate that, with a little bit of effort, you can make significant gains in order to have that data to show others that this works and they should get involved.” He urges others not to look at this work as an isolated activity, but instead more like a campaign that connects to socioemotional learning, academics, and beyond because “if schools think this is something else they have to do, it’s never going to work. Integrate as much as possible.” He also urges coordinators of this work to listen carefully because “even if you have the vision, it’s good to accept that feedback. Your ideas and vision ultimately have to be implemented by others, and you have to accept that. Listen, learn, adjust, and partner.”

He concludes that getting students involved with this effort has been critical. Aiello and his team “have been beating this drum for a decade now, but as soon as a student or child says the same thing, everyone starts listening. That coalition of the willing should include the students. Their voice amplifies far greater than ours.”



ACHIEVEMPLS

THE BIG IDEA:

Leverage the partnership of a college access program to provide districtwide support.

BACKGROUND:

Formed in 2002, AchieveMpls is a 501(c)(3) based in Minneapolis and is the strategic nonprofit partner of Minneapolis Public Schools. AchieveMpls' staff of nearly 40 operates career and college centers in 11 Minneapolis and four Saint Paul public high schools, serving more than 15,000 students annually with career and postsecondary planning services. They also collaborate with the city of Minneapolis and other partners to administer the Step Up Youth Employment Program, which connects over 1,400 Minneapolis youth each year with work readiness training, paid internships, and career mentoring with over 200 employers. AchieveMpls also mobilizes hundreds of volunteers for high school career exploration events, hosts public education events to increase knowledge and engagement on issues impacting students and schools, manages Minneapolis Public Schools funds, administers over 60 college scholarships, and provides mini-grants for educators and classrooms.

OTHER KEY STRATEGIES:

- **Develop** a best practice FAFSA campaign calendar and corresponding planning template for 2019-20; disseminate FAFSA completion information to school leadership as a pilot and learning effort in spring 2019.
- **Build** knowledge about the Estimated Postsecondary Completion Rates of the institutions to which students most frequently matriculate, and create digestible templates for school-based staff that will incorporate college graduation rates into advising practice. Emphasize the concept of college graduation rates and student academic profiles (while being MPS-specific and story-centered).

NARRATIVE:

Although NCAN has community-based members across the country working in concert with local school districts, few are as tightly tied as AchieveMpls and Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS). “I think the value-add globally is that we provide professional staff for career and college centers that are embedded in 11 MPS high schools,” says Lauren Bloem, monitoring and evaluation manager at AchieveMpls. “Our staff are not district staff, so they build the capacity of school counseling teams to offer career and college readiness resources and guidance. Therefore MPS can support students in ways that some larger public high schools cannot.” AchieveMpls has a contract with the district that allows them to operate in the schools and access student data. AchieveMpls fundraises additionally for their own staff, so the district is able to get more staff capacity for their money than they would otherwise.

Bloem says that participating in the To & Through Advising Challenge offered a valuable framework for her organization’s career and college readiness work with MPS. “We felt more confident in pushing this work and this conversation forward in the district,” she says. “Most high schools nationally are not thinking about getting their students to college and don’t even know what their college enrollment rates are.”

AchieveMpls works hard to shift the conversation beyond high school graduation to the resources and support students need to succeed in college and careers. The organization coordinates with district counselors and college access network partners (including other local NCAN members), and also brings principals into the conversation about how to shift from thinking only about preparing students for postsecondary enrollment to thinking about postsecondary persistence and completion.

That conversation is not always easy. “We definitely get pushback when we talk about things like postsecondary institutions’ ‘fit’ for students. Because postsecondary completion rates tend to be correlated with selectivity, and selectivity tends to be correlated with ethnicity on campus, high school counselors are often concerned that they are sending students into institutions where they will feel isolated or underrepresented. We have to think about how we frame this,” says Bloem.

“Students need to consider all of their options. Every institution is going to have pros and cons. We’re not going to say to a student who wants to go to two-year institution, ‘Go to a liberal arts school!’ We are thinking about how to help more students make their best career and college choices.”

AchieveMpls also provides substantial training and technical assistance for both school counselors and their own school-based coordinators. Each month they host two team meetings (totaling four to six hours) that focus on college and career readiness professional development topics, including:

- **Data** usage and analysis, for example, identifying strategic groups of students that need specific resources and guidance.
- **“Problems of practice,”** in which staff help each other solve challenges that are common across school sites.
- **Strategic** planning work on specific projects such as reducing summer melt.
- **Equity** issues impacting specific subpopulations and ways to provide appropriate support.

AchieveMpls coordinators work closely with school counselors, and the organization’s program leaders help plan and attend those counselors’ monthly meetings. In the 2018-19 academic year, AchieveMpls also provided college and career readiness professional development for school counselors on topics like Estimated Postsecondary Completion Rates (EPSC), a school- and district-based measure of the completion rates for institutions to which students matriculate, and practical tools that help measure college graduation rates.

AchieveMpls also supports MPS schools through substantial data analysis. An MPS memorandum of understanding and data sharing agreement with AchieveMpls allow the organization to work in MPS schools and also access the district’s student data systems, like Naviance. This differentiates AchieveMpls from other community-based organizations serving the district that are not as fully integrated. Additionally, access to the district’s National Student Clearinghouse data allows AchieveMpls to create school and district profiles.

The AchieveMpls team is also working hard to demonstrate the usefulness of those data to school-based staff and helping those staff understand the aggregate college enrollment rate at their school. They maintain a year-over-year dashboard for comparisons of key metrics like FAFSA completion, postsecondary enrollment, and students' utilization of school Career & College Centers. In the 2018-19 academic year, AchieveMpls created a more usable student-level file for school-based staff by merging demographic, college application, FAFSA completion, and other data (e.g., financial planning and senior planning surveys), which all live in separate databases. Now each MPS high school has a student-level list with these relevant variables that is updated twice monthly.

In 2019-20, the To & Through Advising Challenge spurred AchieveMpls to break out these school-level dashboards in a way that makes the data more formative rather than summative. "Learning that 'we have disparities' at the end of the year can be demoralizing for staff who need to know this information in the middle of the school year so that they can adjust practice, says Bloem. "We've added these data update reports to our team meetings to help staff understand how they can best use that information in real time."

The value proposition of a program like AchieveMpls is clear. As a universal service provider, they work with every student and fulfill a critical career and college readiness role for the district. The next task is to translate and share their knowledge, skills, and services with district staff to empower them to become full partners in this work. "The most challenging part of this transition has been implementing things down to the school level," says Bloem. "It's one thing to agree that this is a good idea. It's another thing to equip staff with the knowledge and resources they need to do the work. That requires a lot more coordination and resources. But we're excited about this collaborative work for student success."





SACRAMENTO CITY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

CALIFORNIA

THE BIG IDEA:

Employ letters to inform students and families about their best fit postsecondary options.

BACKGROUND:

Sacramento City USD is the 10th largest public K-12 school district in California and serves about 43,000 students across 76 campuses. In the 2016-17 academic year, about 40% of students were Hispanic/Latino, while 19% were Asian, 18% were White, and 14% were Black or African American. About 70% of students are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 20% are English language learners. The district is led by Superintendent Jorge Aguilar, who arrived in July 2017 from Fresno USD. Aguilar has a longstanding focus on postsecondary education and his work “is rooted in a philosophy that all students should graduate the K-12 system with the greatest number of postsecondary choices from the widest array of options.”⁴

OTHER KEY STRATEGIES:

- **Continue** annual conferences with students from grades 9-12 to ensure students are aware of milestones and next steps to stay on track for a postsecondary pathway.

NARRATIVE:

“The premise was, ‘If we simply make students aware of their college options, would they apply at a higher rate just by giving them more information?’” explains Christina Espinosa, director of guidance and counseling for Sacramento City USD. “With regards to the college eligibility letters, we took this on in Fresno and tried to replicate what we did there in Sacramento with the understanding that conditions are very different. We’ve very much taken a learning stance here.”

To create the college eligibility letters, the district ran profiles based on high schools’ alumni. The letters stated simply (paraphrased), “These are the Universities of California and California State Universities that fit your academic profile. Students just like you applied there. Consider applying.” The district mailed these letters to students’ homes along with an accompanying mailing to parents telling them to expect the college eligibility letter.

California benefits from a well-defined set of “A-G requirements” for acceptance into the University of California and California State University systems.⁵ These requirements help SCUSD with some, but not all, of students’ eligibility letters. Every student receives an information packet based on their academic profile. In the first year of implementation, students who did not meet the A-G requirements received information on local community colleges. In follow-up focus groups, students indicated they wanted more information on a broader range of institutions, including historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), minority-serving institutions (MSIs), and private colleges. During the 2019-20 academic year, eligibility letters are covering all of the institutional segments and include information on financial aid and scholarships. Although SCUSD does not yet include these institutions’ completion rates in the eligibility letters, it is a decision they are navigating as they aim to help students find the institutions most likely to help them succeed.

The same focus groups in which students requested information on a broader range of institutions yielded other helpful feedback. Students had aesthetic concerns (“it wasn’t student-friendly,” “it looked like a government document,” “there’s a table of contents here”). Parents also had feedback. “We put in bold the tiers of the schools that students should apply to,” says Espinosa. “We heard from some empowered parents that these letters could be *discouraging*. “If UCLA wasn’t in bold are you saying that my student isn’t eligible to go to UCLA?” she remembers hearing.

But the biggest issue was distribution, says Espinosa. Too many of the addresses on file were wrong, which meant students and families were not receiving their letters. “One of the biggest changes we instituted was to deliver these through our counselors and classrooms,” says Espinosa. This academic year, the district preceded distribution with more information much earlier to counselors so that they would be better equipped to share information with students in the fall. “This first year [with the eligibility letters], we didn’t hear a lot of noise, and we didn’t have a lot of time to train counselors, so we just mailed them out,” Espinosa remembers. This year, counselors received training through a partnership with California State University, Sacramento, which offered information both on postsecondary fit and match and a more general “why and how” around the packets.

Espinosa offers some advice to other districts considering a similar approach around eligibility letters: “When we put together these academic profiles for students, we have to take into consideration courses students are taking as seniors. The timeline is really tight. Our students start school at the end of August. You typically have two weeks when students enroll and then shift their schedules. Their schedules aren’t set until the middle of September. Our college application cycle opens Oct. 1. The timeline is tight. We have to print everything the second week of September, and it only gives us two weeks to put everything together, package it, and send it out to students.” That tight timeline can lead to quality control issues (e.g., listed credits are wrong, GPA or on-track indicators may not be updated). “There’s always going to be a small margin of error,” concedes Espinosa.

An upcoming step is to try to better understand the effect sending the college eligibility letters is having. A survey of seniors from the class of 2019 got an 80% response rate, and 15% of respondents said that the letters did affect where they applied. The district will continue to employ this strategy to try to make students aware of their options and provide information through counselors and curriculum that better equips them with college knowledge and financial aid information to take their next step after graduation.

CONCLUSION

This is just the beginning of this transformative work for the five organizations profiled here. The magnitude of students' need for college access and success services is so great that districts and schools across the country must take lessons from these organizations, the other 15 in the To & Through Advising Challenge, and all of the other districts, schools, and organizations being purposeful about students' postsecondary preparation.

One thing is abundantly clear from these profiles: college and career readiness takes effort. These practices and the buy-in it takes to fuel them do not occur by osmosis. That is especially true for districts where postsecondary pathways are not currently a focus and/or districts that are serving significant numbers of first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds, all of which are historically underrepresented in postsecondary education. Each of these organizations took stock of where it was and what it was doing, evaluated data on students' outcomes, gathered stakeholders, and then purposefully mapped out a plan to change their own postsecondary advising strategies and, in turn, students' lives.

NCAN, along with its members, looks forward to continuing to support the organizations and institutions committed or ready to commit to improving the postsecondary outcomes of students across the U.S.

Endnotes

1. <https://k12education.gatesfoundation.org/blog/what-do-high-school-leaders-know-about-their-students-paths-after-high-school-not-enough/>
2. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center defines high-minority schools as schools where at least 40% of the students are Black or Hispanic.
3. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/high-school-benchmarks-2019/>
4. <https://www.scusd.edu/superintendent>
5. <http://www.lbschools.net/Asset/files/Counseling/A-G%20requirements%20EN.pdf>



**NATIONAL
COLLEGE
ATTAINMENT
NETWORK**

1001 CONNECTICUT AVENUE, NW,
SUITE 300
WASHINGTON, DC 20036

WWW.NCAN.ORG