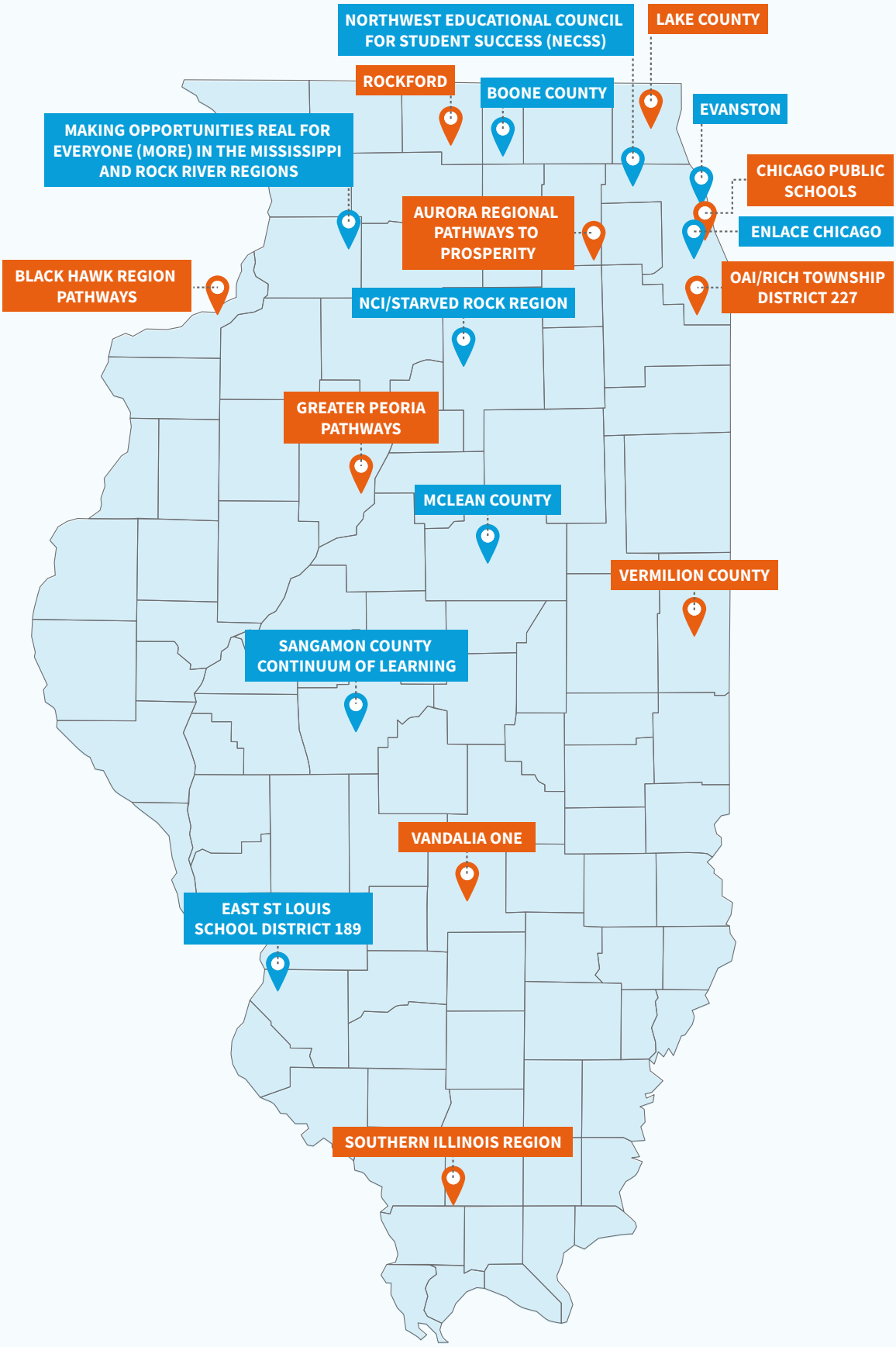
10-Year Impact Report

Assessing the collective impact of the Illinois Education and Career Success Network's first decade: 2013–2023

ILLINOIS EDUCATION AND CAREER
SUCCESS NETWORK

February 2024


NORTHWEST EDUCATIONAL COUNCIL FOR STUDENT SUCCESS (NECSS)
LAKE COUNTY
ROCKFORD
BOONE COUNTY
EVANSTON
MAKING OPPORTUNITIES REAL FOR EVERYONE (MORE) IN THE MISSISSIPPI AND ROCK RIVER REGIONS
CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS
AURORA REGIONAL PATHWAYS TO PROSPERITY
ENLACE CHICAGO
BLACK HAWK REGION PATHWAYS
OAI/RICH TOWNSHIP DISTRICT 227
NCI/STARVED ROCK REGION
GREATER PEORIA PATHWAYS
MCLEAN COUNTY
VERMILION COUNTY
SANGAMON COUNTY CONTINUUM OF LEARNING
VANDALIA ONE
EAST ST LOUIS SCHOOL DISTRICT 189
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS REGION

Acknowledgements

The Network Organizers would like to thank the public and private funders who have supported the Illinois Education and Career Success Network since our founding. This report would not be possible without their support.

In addition, we thank the Leadership Communities, Guiding Team members, and other stakeholders across Illinois for their steadfast commitment to increasing equitable postsecondary attainment, which has led to the successes and best practices highlighted in this report.

Network Organizers

Advance Illinois is an independent policy and advocacy organization working towards a healthy public education system that prepares students to achieve success in college, career, and civic life.

Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University is a policy development and program implementation center whose mission is to shape and strengthen education and workforce systems to advance racial equity and prepare more learners for productive careers and lives in a global economy.

The **Illinois Student Assistance Commission** (ISAC) is the state's college access and financial aid agency with the mission of making college accessible and affordable for Illinois students.

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East St. Louis High School's 2023 graduation ceremony
Photo courtesy of Troy Anthony Photography

Introduction

Since our founding in 2013, the Illinois Education and Career Success Network has supported communities statewide to increase meaningful and equitable postsecondary attainment. This report captures the impact of the Success Network over our ten-year history. In summer 2020, we released our first Impact Report to capture the work up to that point. At the time, we were just five months into the COVID-19 pandemic and did not yet know how extensively the pandemic would ultimately upend and fundamentally reshape the way students learn and how we work. Despite the challenges of the past three years, Success Network Leadership Communities continue to drive state policy implementation and deepen collaboration by using the organizing principles of collective impact. They are advancing equity and reflecting on the practices to maintain in light of changes brought on by the pandemic and widespread movements around social and racial justice. Communities are engaging in the peer-to-peer learning opportunities offered by the Success Network and bringing lessons learned back to their communities. All these practices are helping to improve outcomes for students as they transition from high school to postsecondary education and careers.

Since our last report in 2020, the Success Network has made significant changes designed to further increase its impact by growing the network, engaging students more deeply, strengthening the alignment of policy and practice, and providing greater transparency to statewide data. To that end, we have added three new Leadership Communities, established a Policy Committee and a Student Advisory Council, and revamped the Success Network Dashboard.

We also changed our name from the Illinois 60 by 25 Network to the Illinois Education and Career Success Network in recognition that the work will continue into 2025 and beyond. All these changes are detailed in this report.

10 Year Timeline

2009

The Illinois P-20 Council adopts the goal that 60% of Illinois adults should have a high-quality college degree or postsecondary credential by 2025

2013

LAUNCH

Advance Illinois, Education Systems Center at NIU (EdSystems), and the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) join together as Network Organizers to establish the Illinois 60 by 25 Network, to support commuities to increase equitable and meaningful postsecondary attainment

2014

CONVENE

We host the inaugural conference in East Peoria

2015

ALIGN

We establish the Leadership Community designation to drive meaningful and equitable postsecondary attainment and award it to the first six collaboratives:

- Aurora Regional Pathways to Prosperity
- East St. Louis
- Lake County
- Northwest Educational Council for Student Success (NECSS)
- Greater Peoria Pathways
- NCI/Starved Rock Region

CONVENE

We host the annual conference in Aurora

INNOVATE

To spark high school career exploration and preparation efforts, Network Organizers award grants to Aurora Regional Pathways, East St. Louis, Lake County, NECSS, and Greater Peoria

2016

ALIGN

We award Leadership Community designation to:

- McLean County
- MORE (Making Opportunitues Real in the Mississippi and Rock River Regions)

We launch the Cradle-to-Career Community dashboard

CONVENE

We host the annual conference in Springfield

INNOVATE

To spark career exploration in health sciences, Network Organizers award grants to Aurora Regional Pathways, East St. Louis, NCI/Starved Rock Region, NECSS, and Greater Peoria

The PWR Act is signed into law.

2017

ALIGN
We award Leadership Community designation to:
- Chicago Public Schools
- Enlace Chicago
- OAI/Rich Township District 227
- Rockford
- Vermilion County

We launch the Guiding Team to help inform our work and approach

CONVENE
We host the annual conference in Rockford

INNOVATE
To spark transitional math implementation, Network Organizers award grants to East St. Louis, MORE, NCI/Starved Rock Region, NECSS, and Rockford

2018

ALIGN
We award Leadership Community designation to Sangamon County Continuum of Learning

CONVENE
We host the annual conference in Bloomington

INNOVATE
To spark alignment to College & Career Pathway Endorsements, Network Organizers award grants to Aurora Regional Pathways, East St. Louis, Enlace Chicago, Lake County, McLean County, MORE, NECSS, OAI/Rich Township, Greater Peoria, Rockford, Springfield, and Vermilion County

2019

ALIGN
We award Leadership Community designation to:
- Vandalia ONE
- Evanston

CONVENE
We host the annual conference in Collinsville

INNOVATE
To spark education pathways, Network Organizers award grants to Chicago Public Schools, District 214, Indian Prairie HSD 204, MORE, Springfield District 186, and Vandalia ONE

2020

ALIGN
Our first Impact Report highlights how Leadership Communities are driving state policy implementation, cross-sector collaboration, and declining remediation rates

CONVENE
We host the annual conference in Elgin

We host webinars to understand community needs and share innovative practices to address challenges brought on by COVID-19

INNOVATE
To spark education pathways, Network Organizers award grants to East St. Louis High School, Vermilion Vocational Education Delivery System, and Waubonsee Community College

To spark alignment to College & Career Pathway Endorsements, Network Organizers award grants to NECSS, Grayslake HS District 127, Springfield District 186, and Vandalia ONE

2021

ALIGN
We award Leadership Community designation to:
- Boone County
- Black Hawk Region Pathways

We launch the Student Advisory Council to better understand students' lived experiences in the education system and inform strategies to support the transition from high school into postsecondary

CONVENE
We host the annual conference virtually

INNOVATE
To spark education pathways, Network Organizers award grants to Quad Cities Educator Partnership, Thornton Township High School District 205, Sauk Valley Community College, and Vandalia ONE

2022

ALIGN
We rebrand as the Illinois Education and Career Success Network

We launch the Policy Committee to deepen the connection between policy and practice

500+ high school graduates in Leadership Communities earn a College & Career Pathway Endorsement

CONVENE
We host the annual conference virtually

Leadership Communities revisit goals and share best practices at two regional meetings

We co-host a site visit with Greater Peoria Pathways on career exploration events

INNOVATE
To spark currency for College & Career Pathway Endorsements, Network Organizers award grants to Black Hawk, Illinois Valley, Kaskaskia, Sauk Valley, and Southwestern Illinois community colleges

To spark alignment to College & Career Pathway Endorsements, Network Organizers award grants to Black Hawk Region, Chicago Public Schools, District 214, Rockford, Greater Peoria, MORE, and NECSS

2023

ALIGN
We relaunch the Cradle to Career Dashboard as the Success Network Dashboard, offering expanded and more timely data visualizations to regions

We award Leadership Community designation to the Southern Illinois Region

700+ high school graduates in Leadership Communities earn a College & Career Pathway Endorsement

CONVENE
We host the annual conference in Palos Hills, followed by three supplementary webinars

Leadership Communities review postsecondary enrollment and remediation data and share best practices at two regional meetings

The Policy Committee hosts a data deep dive and quarterly convenings

INNOVATE
To spark currency for College & Career Pathway Endorsements, Network Organizers award grants to Black Hawk, Kaskaskia, Illinois Valley, Shawnee, and Sauk Valley Community Colleges

To spark manufacturing pathways, Network Organizers award grants to Black Hawk Region Pathways, Chicago, Greater Peoria Pathways, MORE, NECSS, Rockford, and Boone County

To spark IT pathways, Network Organizers award grants to Grayslake Central, Grayslake North, Herrin, and Vienna High Schools

Background on the Success Network

Today, most employers say they need employees with some postsecondary education.* However, in 2023, only 57.1 percent of Illinois adults have a high-quality college degree or postsecondary credential.† To address this disconnect, in 2009, the Illinois P-20 Council established a goal for Illinois to increase the number of adults with high-quality college degrees and postsecondary credentials to 60 percent by 2025. While state agencies monitor this goal and focus on policy to support it, state policy alone will not drive the local efforts needed to ensure students seamlessly and successfully progress to and through postsecondary education and into the workforce. Further, there are significant racial disparities in educational attainment—in 2022, the most recent period data are available, rates for Black and Latinx adults were 33.8 percent and 27.6 percent respectively.‡ Because of this, focusing on equity is a foundational value of the Success Network.

Recognizing the emergence of local initiatives across Illinois to increase postsecondary attainment and the lack of a statewide infrastructure to support these efforts, the Illinois 60 by 25 Network (now the Success Network) was launched in 2013 by three organizers: Advance Illinois, Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University (EdSystems), and the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC).

Advance ILLINOIS

EdSystems EDUCATION SYSTEMS CENTER at NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

ISAC Illinois Student Assistance Commission

* "After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031." Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/

† "A Stronger Nation: Learning Beyond High School Builds American Talent." Lumina Foundation. luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/state/IL

‡ Ibid.

Goals and Methodology

The 10-Year Impact Report highlights findings on strategies used and lessons learned by the Success Network while applying a collective impact approach to help communities increase meaningful and equitable postsecondary attainment. The report is intended to both shine a light on the hard work that communities are doing to advance postsecondary attainment and to inspire other communities to implement similar strategies.

To produce this report, we interviewed representatives from organizations that serve as intermediaries for Success Network Leadership Communities and reviewed Success Network collateral material, including Leadership Community applications, Leadership Community reports on innovation grants,* Leadership Community presentations, meeting surveys, and publicly available data.

** Funding awarded to Leadership Communities by Network Organizers to spark innovation to increase postsecondary attainment.*

The goal of the Success Network is to support communities to increase meaningful and equitable postsecondary attainment. Network Organizers offer support by:

- Hosting an annual convening.
- Providing technical assistance on strategies to advance postsecondary attainment.
- Promoting the work of the network and sharing best practices.
- Connecting local efforts to state policy.
- Building local capacity to develop and scale efforts through:
  - Providing funds to communities through innovation grants.
  - Providing a dashboard to help communities visualize education data and compare them with state averages.
  - Convening regional meetings to support community engagement with data and action planning.

Collective Impact: Our Guiding Principle

Since the founding of the Success Network, collective impact has served as the core organizing principle. Collective impact provides an approach for actors from different sectors to work together on a common agenda to solve complex social problems. The Network Organizers recognize that developing community-level approaches for college and career readiness and postsecondary degree and credential attainment require a deep commitment from partners across the spectrum of education, workforce development, community-based organizations, employers, and economic development agencies. Such coordination requires time and resource investments for sustainability, technical assistance, and networking support so communities can innovatively leverage resources.

The Network Organizers are committed to partnering with communities using the process principles of collective impact, which include:

- A common agenda of mutually reinforcing activities and shared qualitative and quantitative goals.
- Data-informed decision-making using shared measurement.
- Clear articulation of mutually reinforcing activities.
- Continuous communication among all stakeholders that make up the birth-to-career system.
- The development of backbone support—an organization that acts as an intermediary for the entire initiative and coordinates participating organizations and agencies.

Guiding Team

In 2017, Network Organizers established a Guiding Team comprised of stakeholders from diverse sectors and communities to bring additional voices to the table, expand our reach within Illinois, and achieve greater impact. As critical thought partners, the Guiding Team helps the Success Network identify areas to address to help advance equitable postsecondary attainment.

Leadership Communities

Since 2015, the Success Network has formally recognized communities with systems in place to drive meaningful and equitable postsecondary attainment as Leadership Communities. To date, 19 communities have applied for and received this designation:

- Aurora Regional Pathways to Prosperity
- Black Hawk Region Pathways
- Boone County
- Chicago Public Schools
- East St Louis School District 189
- Enlace Chicago
- Evanston
- Greater Peoria Pathways
- Lake County
- Making Opportunities Real for Everyone (MORE) in the Mississippi and Rock River Region
- McLean County
- NCI/Starved Rock Region
- Northwest Educational Council for Student Success (NECSS)
- OAI/Rich Township District 227
- Rockford
- Sangamon County Continuum of Learning
- Southern Illinois Region
- Vandalia ONE
- Vermilion County

Leadership Communities are required to do the following:

Capture and use data for continuous improvement

Define a geographic community of focus

Identify a trusted intermediary organization to help build a common agenda with a shared measurement system, harmonize mutually reinforcing activities, measure progress, and foster communication among partners

Develop a plan to implement key strategies for increasing meaningful and equitable postsecondary attainment. Strategies may include:

- Aligning student transitions through postsecondary education and into careers
- Implementing locally prioritized college and career pathway systems
- Supporting implementation of real life learning
- Proactively considering equity in the design and implementation of strategies

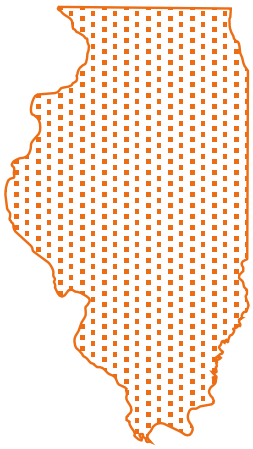
Document a partnership involving employers, workforce boards, education, municipal leadership, and community-based organizations

Photo courtesy of Greater Peoria Economic Development Council

Student Representation

As of fall 2023, Leadership Communities represented school districts serving approximately 45 percent of public high school students in Illinois, totaling about 269,770 students. That representation extended to roughly one in three public high school students outside Chicago.

Leadership Communities serve substantial proportions of Illinois public high school students across demographic subgroups, as demonstrated in the following charts and table. These proportions inform the support Network Organizers offer current and future Leadership Communities.



269,770

public high school students are in Leadership Communities, representing

45%

of Illinois' total high school students

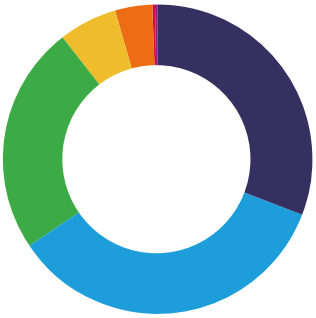
Comparing Student Racial/Ethnic Diversity: State of Illinois Overall vs Success Network

High School Students in Illinois
Enrollment: 595,766

Racial/Ethnic Diversity

- White (46%)
- Latinx / Hispanic (28%)
- Black (17%)
- Asian (5%)
- Two or More (4%)
- American Indians and Alaska Natives (<1%)
- Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (<1%)

High School Students in Leadership Communities
Enrollment: 269,770



Racial/Ethnic Diversity

- White (31%)
- Latinx / Hispanic (35%)
- Black (24%)
- Asian (6%)
- Two or More (4%)
- American Indians and Alaska Natives (<1%)
- Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (<1%)

Illinois, Excluding Chicago
Enrollment: 493,711

Racial/Ethnic Diversity

- White (53%)
- Latinx / Hispanic (24%)
- Black (12%)
- Asian (6%)
- Two or More (5%)
- American Indians and Alaska Natives (<1%)
- Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (<1%)

Leadership Communities, Excluding Chicago
Enrollment: 167,715

Racial/Ethnic Diversity

- White (49%)
- Latinx / Hispanic (25%)
- Black (14%)
- Asian (7%)
- Two or More (5%)
- American Indians and Alaska Natives (<1%)
- Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (<1%)

Note: Calculations are rough estimates based upon application of district racial/ethnic enrollment rates to district enrollment in grades 9-12.
Source: ISBE Fall Enrollment Counts, 2022-23 Home District Enrollment Report

Comparing Student Demographies: State of Illinois Overall vs Success Network

			Excluding Chicago	
	Statewide	Success Network	Statewide	Success Network
Total Enrollment	595,766	269,770	493,711	167,715
Racial/Ethnic Diversity				
White	46.0% *(273,793)*	31.3% *(84,462)*	53.2% *(262,506)*	48.9% *(81,930)*
Latinx / Hispanic	27.5% *(163,783)*	34.5% *(93,191)*	23.6% *(116,427)*	24.3% *(40,707)*
Black	16.5% *(98,430)*	24.2% *(65,318)*	12.5% *(61,925)*	14.2% *(23,814)*
Asian	5.5% *(32,629)*	5.8% *(15,724)*	5.7% *(28,107)*	7.0% *(11,807)*
Two or More	4.2% *(25,085)*	3.6% *(9,841)*	4.7% *(23,099)*	5.1% *(8,591)*
American Indians and Alaska Natives	0.2% *(1,469)*	0.2% *(632)*	0.2% *(1,213)*	0.2% *(369)*
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	0.1% *(577)*	0.1% *(246)*	0.1% *(435)*	< 0.1% *(83)*
IEP	15% *(91,897)*	15% *(40,990)*	15% *(76,417)*	15% *(25,522)*
English Learner	15% *(87,146)*	18% *(47,343)*	13% *(63,850)*	13% *(21,765)*
Low Income	49% *(291,871)*	59% *(159,039)*	44% *(215,066)*	45% *(75,183)*
Homeless	2% *(13,579)*	3% *(7,680)*	2% *(9,377)*	2% *(2,929)*

Note: Calculations are rough estimates based upon application of district racial/ethnic enrollment rates to district enrollment in grades 9-12.
Source: ISBE Fall Enrollment Counts, 2022-23 Home District Enrollment Report

Enhancements to the Work Since the 2020 Impact Report

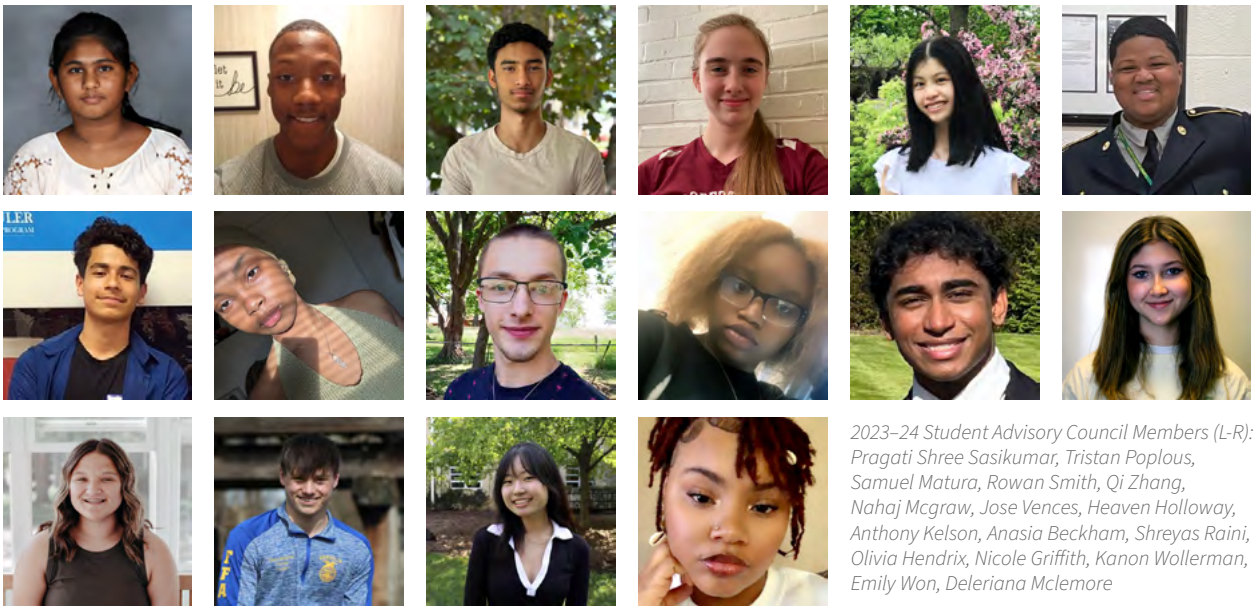
Student Advisory Council

Network Organizers believe that the most effective change is grounded in the experiences and inputs from those most impacted by any system. Therefore, we established a Student Advisory Council in 2020 to gather feedback on how students experience various initiatives that the Success Network supports. In addition, Network Organizers seek to understand what kinds of supports are helpful to students as they navigate the education system. The Student Advisory Council has helped inform our understanding of several topics, including the most impactful strategies in advising and the barriers they face in pursuing work-based learning opportunities.

Student Advisory Council members have also served as ambassadors to other students by sharing tools for planning for life after high school. Network Organizers have centered student voices in our annual conferences by asking students to share their perspectives on how adults can better support students as they transition from high school into postsecondary education. The Student Advisory Council also helps expand students' perspectives as they meet peers from other schools with different experiences. We currently have 16 members and 20 alumni from 14 Leadership Communities.

> "What was most valuable to me was being able to listen to how other school districts operate. This helped me understand that not every school district is going through the same hardship, which calls for different solutions."
>
> – Aline Niyogusenga, Student Advisory Council member, Class of 2023

> "I was able to present information in advisory classes to make knowledge about postsecondary options more accessible."
>
> – Anusha Nadkarni, Student Advisory Council member, Class of 2023



2023–24 Student Advisory Council Members (L-R): Pragati Shree Sasikumar, Tristan Poplous, Samuel Matura, Rowan Smith, Qi Zhang, Nahaj Mcgraw, Jose Vences, Heaven Holloway, Anthony Kelson, Anasia Beckham, Shreyas Raini, Olivia Hendrix, Nicole Griffith, Kanon Wollerman, Emily Won, Deleriana Mclemore

Policy Committee

In 2022, Network Organizers established a Policy Committee to provide opportunities for local practitioners and policy leaders to collaborate and learn from one another, elevate local practice to inform state policy and support local practitioners in taking advantage of policy windows. The Policy Committee is composed of a range of education, workforce, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and state agency stakeholders spanning the P-20 pipeline.

Through the Policy Committee meetings, Network Organizers elevate innovative practices in Leadership Communities. For example, we have highlighted Vermillion County's efforts to increase dual credit (i.e., a college course taken by a high school student for credit at both the college and high school level), and work in MORE and Evanston to implement the Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) framework. The goal is to inform and inspire other communities across Illinois on strategies to support students. As districts face a July 2025 deadline for implementing HB3296/Public Act 102-0917, which builds on the PWR Act, examples of regional implementation are particularly helpful.

The Policy Committee aims to utilize practitioner input to identify issue areas on which to focus workgroup efforts. The first workgroup has focused on transportation barriers for students engaging in work-based learning. The group is developing recommendations to address these barriers, which the committee staff will share with the Illinois State Board of Education, the Illinois Workforce Innovation Board, and other stakeholders to explore solutions.

Transportation-Related Barriers Impacting Student Access to Work-Based Learning

In January 2024, the Policy Committee released its first memo, which sheds light on the significant transportation-related barriers students face in accessing work-based learning opportunities.

PWR Act

A focus for the Success Network is supporting implementation of the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) Act, which applies a competency-based, student-centered approach to preparing for postsecondary education and future careers. Its four pillars are:

Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE): A framework that guides communities on how to organize career exploration and development, college preparation and selection, and financial literacy requirements.

College & Career Pathway Endorsements: A system for school districts to award endorsements on high school diplomas, which reflect that a student has completed an individualized learning plan, engaged in a career-focused instructional sequence, participated in work-based learning, and demonstrated readiness for college-level reading and math.

Transitional Courses: A statewide system for transitional math and English instruction that increases college readiness for high school seniors and reduces remedial education needs.

Competency-Based Education: A pilot program for voluntary school district participation in a competency-based education model, allowing students more flexibility to progress as they demonstrate mastery of concepts.

Data Dashboard

In 2016 Network Organizers launched a Cradle to Career dashboard that provided a wide range of data. In 2022, we engaged Leadership Communities to understand their priorities for metrics and functionality and, in 2023, we launched the updated Success Network Dashboard. The new dashboard allows users to visualize trend data on various education indicators, download it, easily group together data from multiple districts for comparison, and benchmark against state averages and top and bottom quartiles. This is the only resource in Illinois that provides trend data in this way.

We are releasing the updated dashboard in three phases. Phase one included data on postsecondary enrollment and community college remediation, which are now available. Phase two will consist of data on Career and Technical Education and early college enrollment (launching in spring 2024), while phase three will include 9th grade-on-track and graduation rates (launching in summer 2024). With each launch, we invite Leadership Communities to provide feedback on the dashboard's usefulness (as described in our blog post). Over the next year, Network Organizers will seek input from communities on data usage and changes that communities are making as a result of the dashboard by engaging with communities each time a new dataset is released.

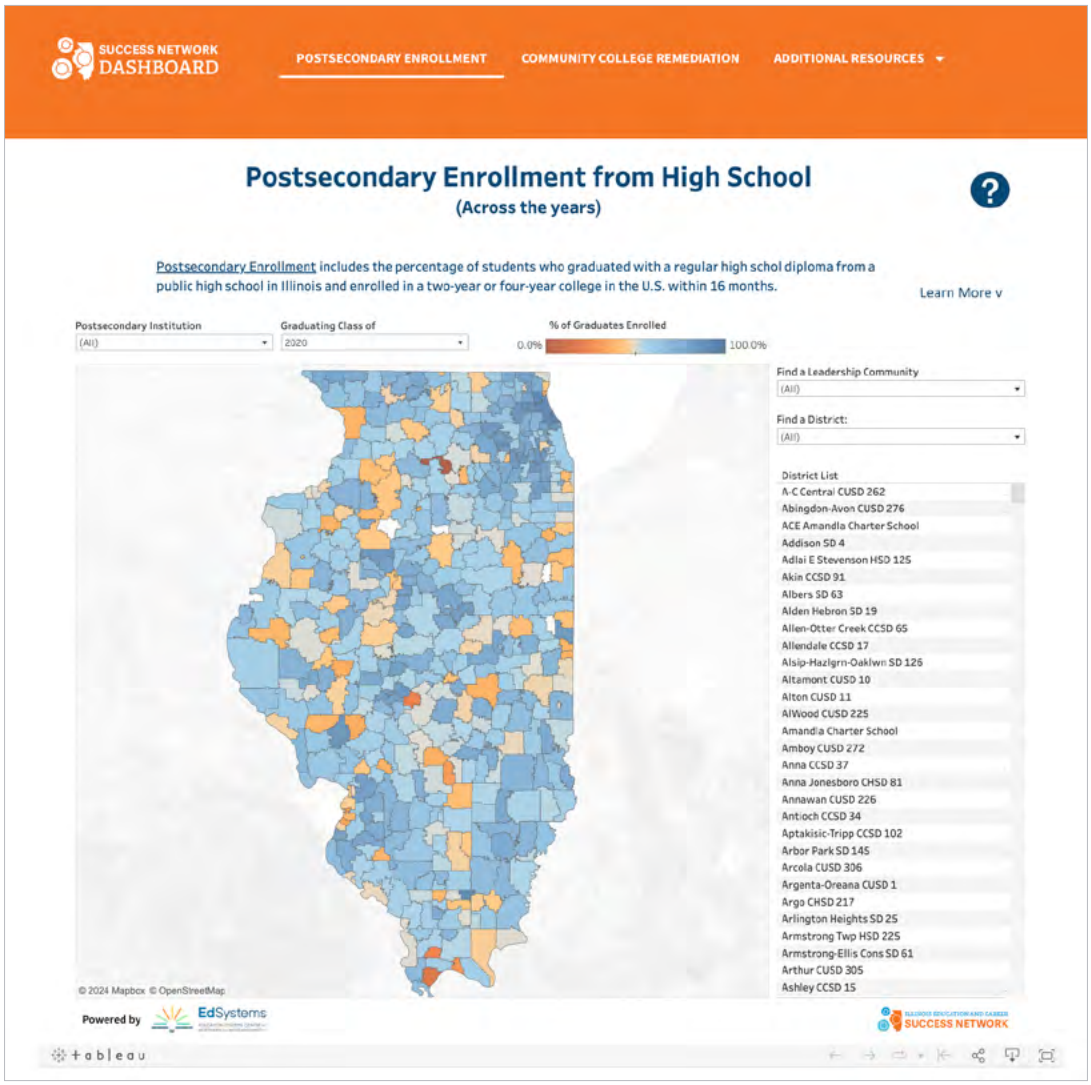


Photo courtesy of NECSS and District 211

Impact Findings

Leadership Communities lead the implementation of new state policies relating to college and career readiness and success, and their work helps inform Illinois agencies about challenges related to policy implementation and supports needed at the local level.

Grants to Leadership Communities Spark Innovation

To date, Network Organizers have provided nearly one million dollars in innovation grants to Leadership Communities. Individual grants range from $10,000 to $25,000 a year to support the implementation of two key strategies of the PWR Act: the College and Career Pathway Endorsements system and transitional math. This grant model enables Network Organizers to seed local implementation efforts and thus build proof points for broader scaling of state policy across Illinois. The relatively small but flexible investments have had a tremendous impact on the ability of many Leadership Communities to catalyze efforts that otherwise may not have been possible. The grants allow community partners to cover various costs, such as hiring substitute teachers to allow partners to convene and develop action plans, paying for students dual credit or enrollment fees, subsidizing student transportation costs to work-based learning experiences, and providing resource materials.

An example of the impact of these grants can be seen in the Making Opportunities Real for Everyone (MORE) in the Mississippi and Rock River Region, which was one of the first communities to implement an education pathway with a grant in 2019. The grant fostered collaboration between secondary and postsecondary partners through shared language and success criteria as well as the development of an education pathway guide. This work helped lay the groundwork for the region to secure a four-year grant totaling $747,000 from the Illinois State Board of Education to support pathways implementation for high school students.

Following are examples of ways communities are leading policy implementation.

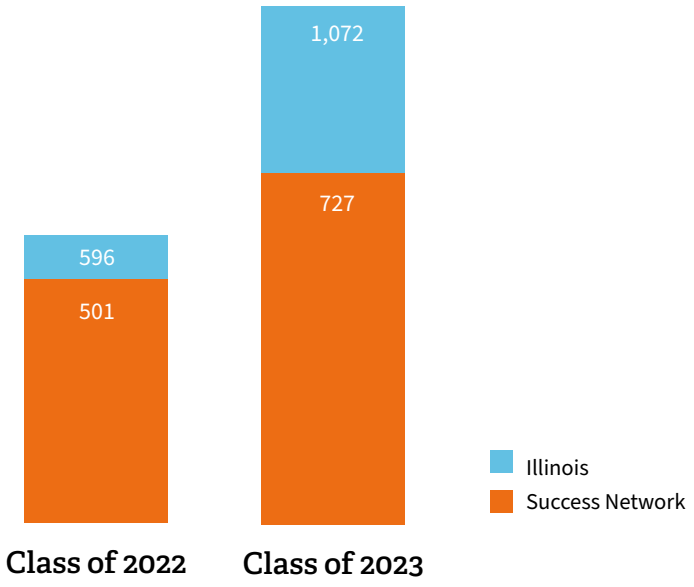
College and Career Pathway Endorsements

The PWR Act establishes a system for school districts to award College and Career Pathway Endorsements on high school diplomas. The endorsement simultaneously demonstrates student readiness for postsecondary programs and entry-level professional learning experiences in a selected career interest area. The endorsement also incentivizes career exploration and acceleration, particularly in high-demand career fields.

Community colleges in Leadership Communities, including Illinois Valley Community College, Kaskaskia College, Sauk Valley Community College, and Shawnee Community College, are leading the way in offering incentives for students who earn an endorsement. This currency can include tuition waivers and covering the cost of books and entrance tests. (More information on these incentives can be found in "Strengthening Student Currency in CCPE: Community College Innovators.") In recognition of the value of College and Career Pathway Endorsements for students' postsecondary preparation, the Illinois Community College Board is now offering funding to support colleges and high school district partnerships as they work together to improve pathway design and maximize currency offerings for endorsement earners. This is a good example of local practice informing policy.

Notably, the number of students in Leadership Communities earning endorsements continues to rise. In 2023, 727 (68 percent) of the 1,072 total College and Career Pathway Endorsements earners came from 20 school districts in Success Network Leadership Communities. This is a 35 percent increase in districts over the Class of 2022, in which seven districts in Leadership Communities endorsed 504 students. Demonstrably, Leadership Communities are early adopters of the College and Career Pathway Endorsements system, and we anticipate these numbers will continue to grow exponentially thanks to HB3296/Public Act 102-0917, which established new expectations for districts serving students in grades 9–12 to either implement the system or formally opt out.

College & Career Pathway Endorsements Awarded



Sources: ISBE College and Career Pathway Endorsement recipient reports for the classes of 2022 and 2023

Transitional Instruction

Transitional instruction courses in high school reduce math and English remediation needs by guaranteeing placement in credit-bearing courses in any Illinois community college and an increasing number of participating universities. As of December 2023, 18 of 19 Leadership Communities have established transitional math courses with their community colleges and at least one high school and have been approved for portability.* This represents a 157 percent increase from 2020, when seven Leadership Communities had been approved or were in the process of receiving approval. Further, eight Leadership Communities have been approved for the portability of transitional English courses.

These courses are having an impact. For example, between school years 2021–23, the Northwest Educational Council for Student Success (NECSS) region has had two cohorts of transitional math and one cohort of transitional English students who have gone on to complete non-remedial coursework at Harper College. Initial NECSS data indicate students who take the transitional math course have a success rate in the non-remedial math course equivalent to students who take the developmental course. Also, the first English cohort of students in school year 2022–23 had a success rate in English 101 on par with students who qualified for the course through traditional measures. These data indicate that transitional instruction is having the intended impact: Students completing transitional instruction are enrolling sooner in college credit-bearing courses, and have been adequately prepared by their transitional coursework to succeed in those courses.

Postsecondary and Career Expectations Framework

The Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) framework guides communities on how to organize career exploration and development, postsecondary preparation and selection,

Photo courtesy of Greater Peoria Economic Development Council

* Portability provides a system for ensuring that competencies and policies are met. Courses with portability offer a student guaranteed placement at their district community college, any other Illinois community college, and any accepting Illinois university.

financial literacy requirements, and guidance for students. According to self-reported data, 41 schools in 12 Leadership Communities are currently implementing or have adopted the framework. Of these schools, 16 have adopted the Illinois PaCE Framework and 25 have customized it to meet the needs of their communities. At no cost, Leadership Communities receive technical assistance from the Illinois Student Assistance Commission to help them understand, adopt, and implement the Illinois PaCE Framework, as well as develop a customized framework to fit their needs.

School districts, including those in Leadership Communities, began implementing PaCE at the lower grades prior to the passing of HB3296 /Public Act 102-0917, which helped inform the policy to push the PaCE requirement down to 6th grade—another example of practice informing policy. As with College and Career Pathway Endorsements, we anticipate the number of school districts adopting PaCE frameworks to grow significantly since HB3296 established requirements for districts to adopt and commence implementation of career exploration and career development activities for grades 6–12.

Competency-Based Education

In contrast to a traditional educational model focused on seat time (the amount of time a student spends in a class), a competency-based education (CBE) model allows students more flexibility to demonstrate mastery in alternative settings and through alternative measures and to progress at their own pace. The PWR Act established a pilot program for voluntary school district participation in moving from seat-time graduation requirements to competency-based high school graduation requirements. Eight Leadership Communities are represented in a cohort of 45 school districts that are offering CBE through the Illinois State Board of Education's pilot.

While the Network Organizers do not provide direct technical assistance on CBE, we do support districts who are implementing various components of CBE and continue to share lessons learned from early implementers with other districts. We have been especially engaged in the work of Chicago Public Schools as their CBE team innovates to address systemic inequities, sharing their learnings with the rest of the state through presentations and publications. We assisted them directly by providing professional development to teachers to implement quality performance-based assessments, for which we awarded a micro-credential.

In the Illinois Math Badging Initiative, supported by Network Organizers, three of the six pilot sites are within Leadership Communities. Math badging is an alternative credentialing mechanism in which students can certify learning gained through a broad range of sources, including coursework, independent study, summer school, and work-based learning. The initiative is helping pilot sites take their innovation around competencies and student preparation to the next level.

To further scale the CBE model, several community colleges—including Kaskaskia, Lincoln Land, and Shawnee Community College, which are within our Leadership Communities—are engaged in a design community to develop CBE programs in the high-demand sectors of welding and industrial maintenance. Network Organizers facilitate discussions among the colleges to collaborate, build consensus on deliverables, and provide guidance on legal and regulatory issues in Illinois. We have also documented lessons learned from the ICCB CBE Design Team.

The Network Is an Important Community of Practice

Since the Success Network's inception, a core tenet has been to focus on opportunities for learning and sharing across communities. Network Organizers have provided an annual conference, targeted technical assistance, and connected communities directly to foster peer-to-peer learning.

In 2021 and 2022, the Success Network hosted its annual conferences virtually and saw a jump to more than 600 registrants for each meeting, with more than 500 attendees participating in real-time and an additional 650+ views of session recordings. In March 2023, we hosted our first in-person conference since 2020 and had our all-time highest in-person attendance, with more than 300 attendees from across Illinois and several other states. Ninety percent of respondents to the conference survey noted that these opportunities are tremendously valuable and provide concrete strategies to advance postsecondary attainment.

We also hosted a webinar series in the weeks following the 2023 conference to build on what was learned at the conference. Representatives from Leadership Communities not only attend the annual conference and webinars but also lead presentations to share best practices on advancing equitable postsecondary attainment in their communities. This engagement provides a platform for communities to raise challenges they are grappling with, learn from other participants, and amplify their own learnings.

> "The annual meetings are a great way to hear what other communities are doing, and we can tweak those ideas and make them work in our community."
>
> – Theresa Todd, Blackhawk Region Pathways

To further support Leadership Communities, Network Organizers hosted two regional meetings per year in 2022 and 2023. These meetings provide Leadership Communities with dedicated time to strategize on their local efforts and leverage the knowledge of peers from other communities. Meetings focused on goal-setting for communities and sharing of best practices in dual credit, transitional instruction, and pathways implementation. Participants also reviewed the updated dashboard and identified action plans based on the data. To allow attendees to participate fully, Network Organizers facilitate the discussions, document the discussions, and share the notes with communities. These meetings provide opportunities for communities to learn about strategies being implemented in other communities that they can take to their communities. For example, at one of the regional meetings, the team from the NCI/Starved Rock Region connected with the Greater Peoria Pathways team and learned about their staff funding model, which they plan to bring to their community.

Using a Collective Impact Approach Strengthens Collaboration Across Partners and Sectors

Communities noted that collective impact has fostered strong collaboration among diverse stakeholders by promoting information sharing, resource pooling, and joint problem-solving. For example, in the NECSS, rather than each district working individually with the community college on a dual credit course, all three school districts work through the process simultaneously. Even if one district isn't ready to implement, the information is already in place when they are. In Black Hawk Region Pathways and NCI/Starved Rock Region, leaders have educated the business community about how students can help build their employee pipeline. As a result, both communities have seen stronger engagement with employers. In the NCI/Starved Rock Region, more employers are willing to participate in career expos, serve as guest speakers, and provide opportunities for job shadows to students. In the MORE region, using collective impact has increased collaboration from the business community, and the partners have been able to get more students in front of potential employers than ever before.

> "Collective impact has been the key to the success of the NECSS region because it allows us to leverage resources and people."
>
> – Nancy Awdziejczyk, NECSS

> "With collective impact, you can accomplish so much more because the lines of communication are open. It doesn't make sense to do it any other way."
>
> – Kris Noble, MORE

The Pandemic Has Led to Both Challenges and Innovation

More than three years into the COVID-19 pandemic, Leadership Communities reflected on challenges brought on by the pandemic and the new practices that have emerged to address the challenges.

The NECSS community noted that the pandemic pushed social and emotional learning to the forefront as students needed support due to the impact of isolation and other challenges brought on by remote learning. Districts in the region have implemented social and emotional learning in a number of ways:

- District 211 has conducted an annual social and emotional learning survey three times to proactively identify areas for intervention. Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds have been utilized to offer students supplementary support in academics, attendance, language acquisition, and social-emotional learning.
- District D214 has proactively addressed reduced attendance since the pandemic by educating families on the significance of attendance, strengthening support for social and emotional learning, increasing staffing and attention, and offering assistance to families. Furthermore, there are increasing conversations around broader opportunities for flexible scheduling to accommodate various schooling models.
- In District 220's second year of a social and emotional learning curriculum review, leaders shifted the process to encompass the entire K-12 spectrum instead of focusing on elementary, middle, and high school levels separately. Additionally, there is a concerted effort to align family components and resources with the needs identified during the reviews. The implementation of these changes is planned for the following year.
- Harper College implemented a new 24/7 online peer support system, utilizing social media as an innovative approach to counseling services. Additionally, support groups will be introduced in spring 2024. The initiative involves expanding social and emotional learning staff and opportunities, with the goal of naturally increasing student wellness and increasing engagement in activities to foster an overall sense of belonging.

In Rockford, students must pass a college placement exam for some dual credit courses. When the pandemic began, the exams were waived because the college did not have the ability to proctor them, as students were primarily remote and could not go to the testing center on campus. However, the students who were placed into those college-level courses succeeded. This natural experiment demonstrated that placement exams can become barriers to entry for students who could succeed but may be bad test takers or may be having a bad day. This community is now advocating for a multiple-measures placement to provide more equity for students' access to dual credit.

The pandemic limited students' access to work-based learning opportunities, as some employers could not allow students on their premises. However, remote learning created an opportunity to innovate. In Evanston, like many communities across the state, the school closed when the pandemic began, but many businesses stayed open. To ensure that students still had work-based learning opportunities, the Mayor's Employer Advisory Council implemented virtual career awareness panels, which were recorded and shared with teachers for ongoing use as a career awareness tool.

East St Louis School District 189 noted that when schools closed due to the pandemic, many students got jobs to support their families, which impacted their participation in school and led to them falling behind in their classes. To help students recover credit hours, the district extended the school year, offered evening classes (a practice they have maintained), and provided training for counselors to increase their awareness of the graduation requirements across all grade levels. Because of these efforts, the district's graduation rate increased by nearly two percent from to Class of 2019 to the Class of 2022. District 189 also noted that one of the lessons learned from the credit recovery process is that waiting until junior and senior years is too late to intervene, and they must intervene starting in the freshman year to ensure that students meet all the graduation requirements.

Photo courtesy of Troy Anthony Photography

Leadership Communities Are Committed to Advancing Equity

Equity is a foundational value of the Success Network. Network Organizers encourage communities to proactively identify and implement strategies that benefit students farthest from opportunity. We also challenge ourselves and communities to elevate stakeholder engagement strategies and include more student and stakeholder voices to co-design solutions, shifting power dynamics to give stakeholders more agency. Leadership Communities are doing this in a variety of ways.

In the Greater Peoria Pathways region, the Regional Office of Education has hired a professional specialist to focus on diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI). She is hosting professional learning and book studies on DEAI topics and co-hosting DEAI network meetings across the state for administrators, teachers, and support staff in conjunction with the nonprofit WEST40. She is also helping to surface the challenges students, especially those from underrepresented groups, face in accessing work-based learning and other opportunities and will work with stakeholders to identify solutions to the challenges. While this is a relatively new position, Network Organizers look forward to sharing lessons learned from the Greater Peoria region with others across the state.

The East St. Louis D189 team is committed to including more youth perspectives in decision-making. For example, students who participated in AVID in middle school continued to participate at the high school level, but not all students had access to the course.* Members of the Superintendent's Student Advisory Council recommended that all students have access to AVID for one year to help them prepare for life after high school, and the district is making that adjustment. The superintendent and school leaders meet with the council every quarter to gather feedback on the support students need.

In Rockford D205, the team used empathy interviews to amplify student voices and advance equity. Through their participation in EdSystems' Scaling Transformative Advanced Manufacturing Pathways initiative, a team from Rockford Public Schools conducted empathy interviews with students to better understand their needs. The team has done digital surveys of students in the past, and those data are helpful, but they noted that asking open-ended questions, though more time-consuming, is more powerful and meaningful. They were able to get the nuances from student answers that they might not get from a survey. As a result of the interviews, students are being placed in the programs of study they really want to be in, which means they're more likely to get early college credit or industry certification.

In MORE, the Hispanic Business Leaders Committee, an initiative of the Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce, awarded scholarships to four local students from the Sauk Valley to support their postsecondary education in school year 2023–24. This was the first time scholarships were awarded. Demand for the scholarships was very high, and the group plans to continue this practice.

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* AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is a program that provides scaffolded support that educators and students need to encourage college and career readiness and success.

In the Black Hawk Regional Pathways, when the Work-Based Learning Intermediary works in schools where many students don't have vehicles, she encourages employers to attend career awareness and exploration events at the school. For off-site events, she makes sure transportation is available so that students who don't have vehicles are not left out and she asks employers to provide lunch.

> "To advance equity, I seek out students in the spaces where they are. For example, initiatives such as Evanston Scholars and First Generation Scholars target students of color. So I'm intentional about seeking out and building partnerships with those programs to get information about work-based learning opportunities to students."
>
> – Tana Francellno, formerly with the Mayor's Employer Advisory Council (Evanston)

Intermediaries Require Dedicated Staff and Clear Communication to be Effective

Leadership Communities are required to identify an entity that will serve as the intermediary for the community—this is intended to ensure continuity and clarity of leadership in support of the collective work. The intermediary is responsible for the operational functions the Leadership Community team members identify, including coordinating and facilitating meetings and supporting the completion of action plans. The intermediary is responsible for both daily thinking about the next steps to move career pathway system development and postsecondary attainment forward and acting as the effort's champion, promoting and advocating for the effort to the Leadership Community team, key partner agencies, and the community as a whole.

> "It's about serving the Kool-Aid and encouraging people to drink it. You must also be able to motivate your partners to think outside the box."
>
> – Sydney Stigge-Kaufman East St. Louis D189

While intermediaries can serve critical roles across communities, our Leadership Communities have shared that it is not enough to simply identify one. Several communities noted that you need a point person to coordinate the work, and that person is more effective if serving as the intermediary is their primary responsibility. The person should have the time to support the effort and use systems-level thinking, which allows them to understand all partners' roles and support them in effectively playing those roles.

> "Communication and transparency are critical. Make sure the right people are at the table, and communicate that the goal of collaborating is not to increase the work but to work more efficiently."
>
> – Kris Noble, MORE

Communities have different models for the intermediary. In Evanston, the Chair of the Mayor's Employer's Advisory Council is a retired business executive who fills the role on a voluntary basis, providing him with the time and capacity to support the Leadership Community. Further, the school district invested in hiring a Career Partnership and Work-Based Learning Coordinator, who reports to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and serves as the bridge between employers and students. This role has helped grow the number of students participating in internships.

In NECSS, the Education for Employment (EFE) Director serves as the intermediary and collaborates efforts across three school districts and the community college.

> "Systematize the work so it doesn't live with people but lives with an organization to ensure that the work survives transitions."
>
> – Nancy Awdziejczyk, NECSS

> "Get as many partners to the table as possible. Then create a consistent meeting schedule, an agenda, and hold people accountable for carrying out specific tasks."
>
> – Jennifer Scheri, NCI/Starved Rock

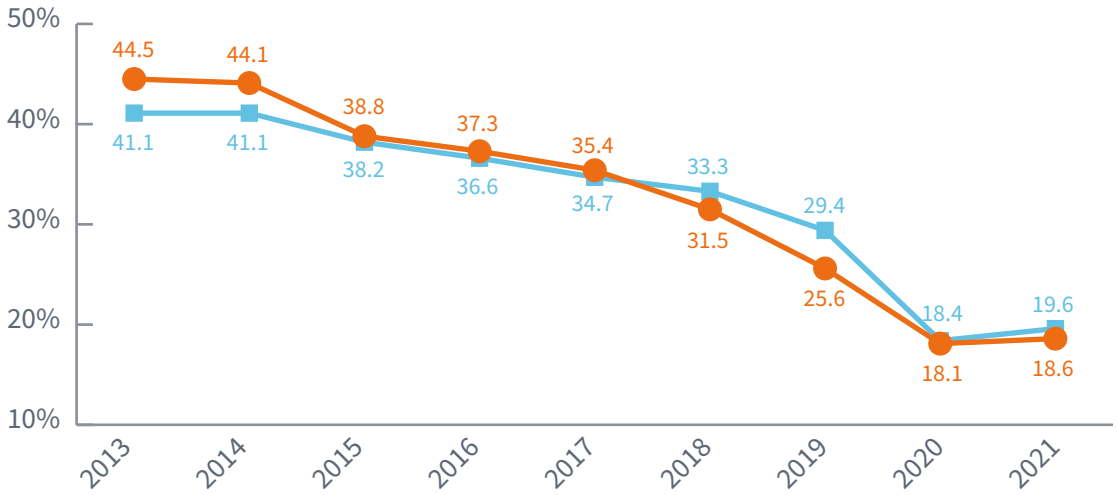
Celebrating Student Outcomes

While many factors influence student outcomes, Network Organizers believe the strategies and approaches that Leadership Communities implement—such as cross-sector collaboration, securing innovation grants to be early adopters of policy, and participating in peer-to-peer learning—are vital contributors to successful student outcomes. Data are beginning to reflect this. For example, as you will see in this section, remediation rates in Leadership Communities are consistently lower than statewide rates. The Success Network was driving the reduction in Illinois' math and reading declines for a number of years and is still setting the pace for remediation reduction or the rest of the state. This means that students avoid remedial course requirements and can enter directly into credit-bearing math and English classes in college, which saves students time and money.

The Network Organizers are taking advantage of improvements in local and state data infrastructure that enable richer analysis of disaggregated and trend data. Organizers will continue to aim analyses, for the Success Network and the Leadership Communities, towards creating meaningful and actionable information for stakeholders.

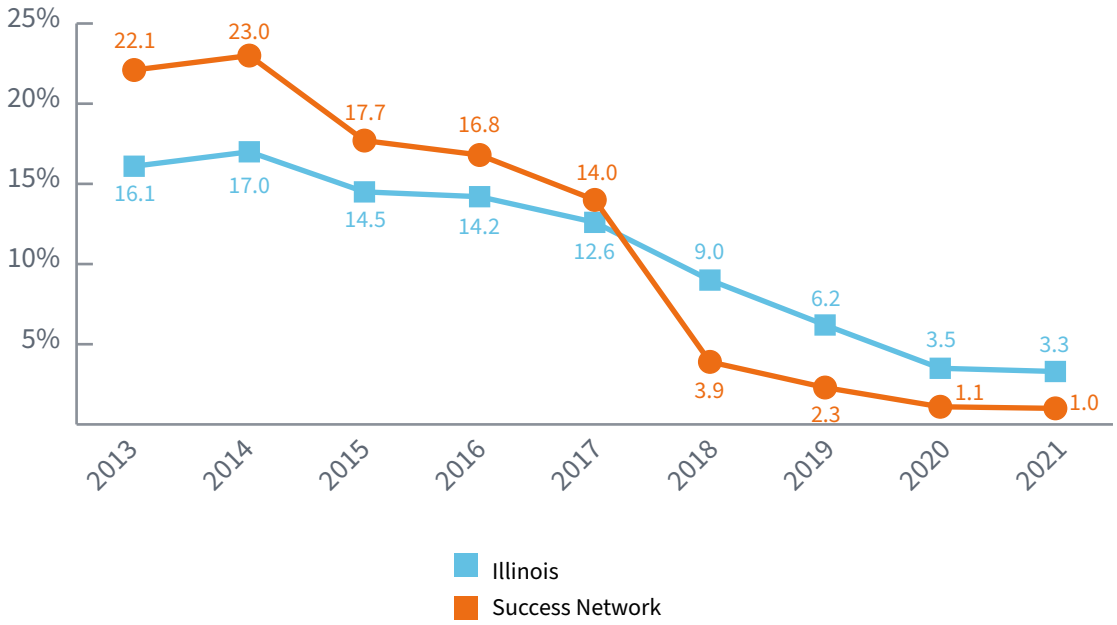
Math Remediation

Between 2013 and 2021, remedial math enrollment fell by 21.5 percentage points across Illinois and 25.9 percentage points in Leadership Communities between the high school graduating classes of 2013 and 2021.



Reading Remediation

Between 2013 and 2021, remedial reading fell by 14.8 percentage points across Illinois and 20.9 percentage points in Leadership Communities between the high school graduating classes of 2013 and 2021.



Sources: ISBE Postsecondary Remediation Report, 2015-2017; ISBE Illinois Report Card Public Data Set, 2018-2023

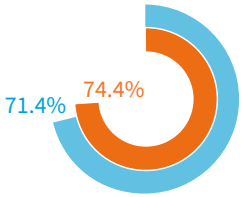
Financial Aid Applications

According to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, completing a financial aid application is often considered the first step in making education after high school possible for Illinois students. An Illinois student who completes a financial aid application may be eligible to receive as much as $15,795 if they qualify for the federal Pell Grant and the Illinois Monetary Award Program—funding that can make the difference for thousands of low-income students statewide.

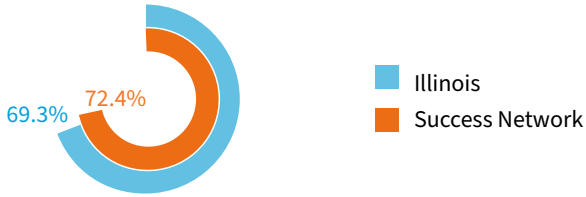
Further, Illinois law requires all public high school seniors to complete either the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid (Alternative Application) as a prerequisite to receiving a high school diploma. Additionally, high schools are expected to provide students and their families with any support or guidance necessary to comply with the requirement. For students who choose not to file an application, a Financial Aid Application Nonparticipation Form may be signed by a parent or guardian.

Relative to the entire state, the Success Network had higher rates of 12th grade students starting a financial aid application (74.4 percent versus 71.4 percent) and completing an application (72.4 percent versus 69.3 percent) for the Class of 2023. Both statewide and across the Success Network, the rates of students starting and completing the application have increased by more than four percentage points since we last reported in 2020.

Seniors Starting Financial Aid



Seniors Completing Financial Aid



Of those who did complete the applications, the Success Network represents a higher rate of students elibile for federal Pell Grant funding (48.4 percent versus 43.6 percent).

	Statewide	Success Network
Total Class of 2023 students	*134,875*	*50,834*
Started financial aid applications	71.4% *(96,254)*	74.4% *(37,807)*
Completed financial aid applications	69.3% *(93,506)*	72.4% *(36,782)*
Completers eligible for the federal Pell Grant program	43.6% *(40,727)*	48.4% *(17,809)*

Notes: Financial aid applications include both FAFSAs and Alternative Applications for Illinois Financial Aid. ISAC uses prior year SAT takers as its approximate denominator. Source: ISAC Financial Aid Application Data File, 2022–23 cycle

Challenges

Leadership Communities are committed to collaborating across sectors to leverage resources in service of students. However, some themes emerged around challenges that impacted their effectiveness.

A Need for Dedicated Staff for Intermediary Organizations

As noted earlier, Leadership Communities are required to identify an entity that will serve as the intermediary for the community—this is intended to ensure continuity and clarity of leadership in support of the collective work. Staff turnover in intermediaries and among partner organizations and not having enough people to do the work are key challenges identified by communities. Some communities address the capacity issue by sharing the intermediary responsibilities across different organizations. Also, sustaining the work is difficult because there are often no dedicated funds to support the staff time needed to implement it. Network Organizers will continue to explore funding opportunities and highlight effective structures to support intermediaries.

"Make sure that the role of the intermediary is well-defined and that they're connecting people within the community."

– Neil Gambow,
Mayor's Employer Advisory Council (Evanston)

Better Socialization of the Value of Dual Credit

Some communities noted that some partners have concerns about implementing dual credit because of the perception that it is not rigorous. However, EdSystems, in partnership with other Illinois leaders, conducted a survey in 2022 to a broad range of stakeholders, and 83 percent of respondents indicated that they believe dual credit courses are valuable and rigorous. The same percentage also indicated that dual credit classes are college courses. Respondents also noted the importance of dual credit in helping students and families save money and time on postsecondary education and supporting students in gaining exposure to the rigor and diversity of course offerings at the college level.

"Find something that unifies people in the community like the PaCE Framework and use it as your organizing tool to bring different stakeholders to the table."

– Beth Crider,
Greater Peoria Region

Policy Barriers

While many strides have been made in college and career readiness policy, including strategies advanced by the Leadership Communities, there are still systemic barriers to student access and success.

Transportation Continues to be a Barrier

As noted in the 2020 report, lack of transportation continues to hinder students from participating in college and career readiness activities. This is particularly the case for students aiming to participate in work-based learning experiences for school credit because the school must provide transportation, which can be cost-prohibitive or difficult to secure the right vehicles and credentialed drivers. Further, identifying viable school-provided alternatives often brings additional legal or financial barriers. The Policy Committee has been working to explore these barriers, including equity implications, and recently released a memo with their findings.

"Identify the outcomes you want for your community and, from there, build the initiatives to accomplish those goals."

– Dr. Richard Bush, Blackhawk Region Pathways

Lack of Qualified Instructors to Teach Dual Credit

Communities identified the lack of instructors qualified to teach dual credit classes as a barrier to expanding these opportunities for students. Further, when the few qualified teachers leave, schools don't have a quick, easy replacement, creating stress for the schools. Network Organizers are monitoring the implications of the Dual Credit Quality Act Amendment passed in 2022 and emerging Higher Learning Commission teacher qualification policies to advocate for systemic changes that will empower districts to scale quality dual credit opportunities for their students.

Implications for the Network Moving Forward

Based on feedback received and the review of data for this report, Network Organizers will continue to offer supports for communities in 2024 and beyond, including the following:

- **Lift up equitable policies and practices** to advance postsecondary attainment and support communities in implementing them, to ensure they are reaching students who are farthest from opportunity.
- **Center student voice** by engaging the Student Advisory Council and sharing their recommendations with Leadership Communities and other stakeholders.
- **Strengthen the data capacity** of Leadership Communities, including reviewing disaggregated data, and assessing what is working well and what improvements are needed as communities interrogate the data on the Success Network Dashboard and develop action plans.
- **Align policy and practice** through the Policy Committee.
- **Seek funding** to support the capacity of intermediary organizations.
- **Organize convenings** to provide peer-to-peer learning opportunities for communities.
- **Encourage Illinois state agencies and funders** to utilize the Success Network as a key partner in policy implementation.

"If you're considering becoming a Leadership Community do it! You'll be able to share resources with other communities, and other communities will share resources with you, so you won't have to start from scratch. In Rockford, we've been able to use what's already been developed by our peers and just tweak it a little bit to meet our needs."

– Bridget French, Rockford

"Join the Network and take advantage of every opportunity to learn and grow and use the resources the Network provides."

– Dr. Darryl Hogue, MORE

Conclusion

Collaborating across sectors to advance equitable and meaningful postsecondary attainment requires intentional effort, strategic partnership, and centering student voices. Leadership Communities have fostered strong partnerships to create the necessary conditions to improve student outcomes. Network Organizers are excited for the work ahead, recognizing that if all communities harness the partnerships in their communities, their efforts will lead to a more prosperous future for Illinois students, especially those farthest from opportunity. The Success Network will continue to learn from and support communities as they work to leverage the power of collective impact in service of students' access to and success in postsecondary education and careers.

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