THE GRAD PARTNERSHIP | Advancing Student Success Systems

Beyond High School Graduation:

How Student Success Systems Can Help Put All Students on a Pathway to Adult Success in the Age of AI

November 2026

In the 20th century, comprehensive high schools in the US were designed to be the end point of formal education for most students. Some went on to college, but many more went into the workplace, with a high school diploma providing a ticket to a family-sustaining wage.[i] That world no longer exists. It's projected that by 2031, 85% of "good jobs" will require some form of postsecondary education and two-thirds of "good jobs"[ii] will require at least a bachelor's degree.[iii]

To best serve the health and wealth of our nation and its local communities, high schools must succeed in a new mission: putting all students on a pathway to adult success in the age of AI. This includes graduating them ready for postsecondary schooling and/or workforce training, able to make informed choices, and connected to what comes next.

The encouraging news is that the factors that increase the odds of our high school students graduating on a pathway to adult success are known, measurable, and actionable. Schools, organizations that they partner with, postsecondary institutions, businesses, workforce agencies, and researchers have been testing out approaches, and generating and assembling evidence about what matters most for keeping students on this pathway. Schools can be deliberately organized around these key practices to give every student the skills, knowledge, experiences, and guidance needed to succeed in postsecondary pathways aligned with their goals.

Known Factors That Drive College and Career Readiness and Informed Postsecondary Choices for All

Decades of longitudinal research point to a consistent set of high-school drivers of readiness and informed postsecondary decision making:

1. **Completing core college preparatory course sequences.** Taking and succeeding in the academic courses aligned with the admission requirements of the state flagship university (in addition to meeting district graduation requirements) is among the strongest predictors of eventual college completion. The intensity and quality of a student's high school curriculum predicts bachelor's-degree attainment more powerfully than test scores, class rank, or socioeconomic status.[iv]

2. **Taking at least one college-level course while in high school.** Earning college credit in high school through AP, dual enrollment, IB, or early-college coursework is associated with higher rates of college completion. Nationally, students who begin dual-enrollment coursework attend college at higher rates than their peers, and complete a credential at higher rates, with the largest gains accruing to low-income, Black, and Hispanic students.[v]

3. **Earning at least a B- GPA.** High school grade-point average is a strong and remarkably consistent predictor of college graduation, roughly five times stronger than ACT scores, and holds up across very different high schools, because grades capture the sustained effort, work habits, and academic behaviors that college demands.[vi]

4. **Concentrating in a career pathway linked to high-wage local occupations.** Completing a sequence of CTE (Career and Technical Education) courses aligned to a career pathway, and where possible earning an industry-recognized credential, improves both education and labor-market outcomes. CTE concentrators graduate high school at meaningfully higher rates than otherwise-similar students, and are more likely to be employed and to earn higher wages after high school. The benefits tend to be largest for low-income students.[vii]

5. **Avoiding course failures.** Course performance in the ninth-grade year is the most direct in-school predictor of whether a student graduates. Students who finish freshman year "on-track" (meaning on pace in credits with no more than one semester course failure) graduate at far higher rates, and this indicator predicts graduation better than race, socioeconomic status, and prior achievement combined.[viii] Attendance, behavior, and course performance ("the ABCs") reliably flag students who are drifting off the path to graduation as early as the middle grades, using data schools already collect.[ix] In addition, recent research indicates that students who graduate but experienced course failures while in high school have considerably lower odds of earning a postsecondary degree.[x]

6. **An integrated series of college and career exposures, experiences, and applications, grades 9–12.** Readiness is built through a coherent progression of experiences, and shouldn't wait for a one-time event in senior year. This helps students connect current schoolwork to future goals, and gives them time while still in high school to test out interests that emerge. Students earn better grades and stay on-track at higher rates in schools where they perceive that what they are doing now is preparing them for the future.[xi] High-quality work-based learning can yield substantial benefits as it provides opportunities for hands-on learning, allows students to build social capital, and facilitates the development of positive relationships that support personal growth.[xii]

7. **Access to college and career advising, grades 9–12.** Individualized guidance changes postsecondary behavior. Students who receive such support for college planning are far more likely to complete key steps such as filling out the FAFSA, submitting applications, and developing confidence in their pathway. Even though we know lower student-to-counselor ratios are associated with higher rates of college-going and postsecondary planning,[xiii] the national ratio of students to counselors, about 405:1 in recent years, remains well above the 250:1 that the profession recommends.[xiv] Schools and community partners are implementing new strategies that don't rely solely on counselors for increasing access to high-quality guidance that ensures students complete access milestones and receive post-graduation support to address any hurdles on the way to enrollment, enlistment, or

employment. Intentionally including family members, businesses, and community partners in conversations about career and postsecondary options can deepen the quality of understanding and decision making about what comes after high school. Having each student develop an individualized career and academic plan (ICAP)[xv] helps focus the approach on a student's true goals, and provides entry points for other supporters beyond a counselor to contribute to keeping a student on a path toward their goals.

8. **Experiencing supportive school environments and developing the skills and competencies that underlie all of the above.** These drivers of success are accelerated when students experience agency, belonging, and connectedness in school and develop the durable competencies increasingly captured in state and local portraits of a graduate. A large meta-analytic literature links students' sense of school belonging to stronger engagement, motivation, and academic outcomes, and to lower absenteeism and dropout.[xvi]

High Schools Were Not Designed for What They Now Need to Do

Providing all students with access to these drivers of college and career readiness, and the supports needed to obtain and succeed in them, is challenging for secondary schools. Traditionally, each of these elements was thought of as something high schools needed to provide to some students, and they were resourced and developed capacities accordingly. It was also explicitly or implicitly assumed that students would self-select or be sorted into the track for which they could succeed without sustained or substantial support. The evidence is clear, however, that if we want all our high school students to graduate with a pathway to adult success, schools will need to be intentionally organized to provide access and supports to each of these factors to all students.

The rapid rise of AI further complicates what is asked of high schools. Even before AI, the world of work was changing so rapidly that new occupations were being created at a rate that outstripped family experience and knowledge. AI now adds a further element of unpredictability in identifying pathways to adult success for high school students, since it can be hard to predict which careers AI may displace. As the one public institution the vast majority of adolescents pass through, it will fall to high schools to provide, as best they can, updated and evolving information on how the world of work is changing. In addition, the skills and knowledge high schools are asked to help students develop may shift as well. All of this will require operating systems most high schools currently don't have.

Student success systems can play a critical role in providing schools with the organizational capacity they need to meet these challenges.

Using Student Success Systems to Put All Students on a Pathway to Adult Success in the Age of AI

Student success systems are an evidence-based approach to organizing a school community around keeping students on a pathway to adult success. Through the integration of supportive relationships, actionable data, and strategic actions, supported by student-centered mindsets, student success systems enable schools to design and implement systematic approaches to address school-wide achievement patterns and better support the academic progress, career and college transitions, and well-being of all students.

HOW STUDENT SUCCESS SYSTEMS ADDRESS THE MISSING CAPACITY

Student success systems are designed to build on the existing strengths and resources of schools while addressing organizational, process, and mindset gaps that hinder schools' abilities to simultaneously promote the success of all students. Student success systems help schools realize the vision of putting all students on a pathway to adult success by enabling them to:

1. **Progress monitor every student on the known drivers.** A student success system tracks all students against the measurable drivers of college and career readiness including taking the necessary courses, earning a B or better while avoiding failures, and maintaining strong attendance and behavior patterns so the school can see which students need which supports. Because these indicators use data schools already collect, a school can also establish a baseline, track overall progress, and test which strategies and supports result in the improvements they are striving for.

2. **Provide schools with a means to progress monitor new indicators of student success as they emerge in an AI world.** The impact of AI on the skills and knowledge high schools will need to develop in their students, as well as the guidance provided on how the world of work is changing, can be incorporated into the existing routines of a student success system. One of student success systems' inherent strengths is that they can serve as a ready-made operating system for any goal.

3. **Identify strategic areas for improvement and monitor what works.** Rather than intervening student-by-student in isolation, the system surfaces the patterns, including courses, grade levels, or transitions, where the most students fall off track to adult success. This enables school staff to deploy schoolwide strategies, target improvement efforts that lift the largest number of students, and then monitor their impact as part of a continuous-improvement cycle.

4. **Extend the reach of over-stretched counselors and teams.** Grade-level or small-learning-community success teams can track each student's participation in the 9–12 series of college and career exposures, experiences, and applications (reflected in their ICAP), and problem solve the roadblocks to participation until every student is reached. The same process can be used for monitoring progress toward the competencies in a portrait of a graduate and school-wide postsecondary goals.

5. **Add person-power for pathway guidance for students and families.** The system provides the additional capacity to guide students, grades 9–12, on the opportunities and preparation required for different pathways to adult success, and to share that information with families. Student success systems pair well with complementary efforts to bring other resources into schools and surface high-value opportunities for in and outside of school partners to contribute to needed interventions.

6. **Build a local student-success ecosystem with colleges and universities.** Working with nearby two- and four-year institutions, a student success system can bring college work-study students in as tutors, mentors, and success coaches. Mentoring, advising, and coaching interventions have demonstrated effects on persistence and achievement,[xvii] and near-peer models strengthen belonging and engagement for both mentee and mentor.[xviii] Over time, these partnerships can create seamless supports that carry students from high school into and through college and certificate programs. Growing numbers of colleges concerned about high freshmen course withdrawal and failure rates are creating their own student success systems. K-12 systems and institutes of higher education partnering

to integrate student success efforts from grades 9-16 can be an effective approach to increasing high school and college success. Incorporating dual enrollment and early colleges into these ecosystems can strengthen CTE options and support postsecondary institutions' enrollment goals.

7. **Bring student voice and student-designed solutions to the work.** Student design teams give the system a channel for student voice, and generate solutions that help students whose needs are sometimes missed by adults' blind spots. This element reinforces the agency and belonging that underpin every other driver, and the cultivation of the mindset that every student can be successful.

8. **Keep students on-track in the upper grades.** Finally, a student success system aimed at putting all students on a pathway to adult success continues the foundational work of success teams beyond ninth grade: supporting regular attendance, well-being, school connectedness, and course success for all students through graduation, because while the freshman year is crucial for high school graduation, staying on-track to postsecondary success requires consistent and tailored support across all four years.

Conclusion

The factors that put students on a pathway to adult success are known and measurable, and the field has shown us that it is possible to provide students the experiences and supports to achieve them. What most schools lack is not the will but the organizational capacity to provide the requisite access, experiences, and supports to align with this vision. Student success systems can play an important role in providing that capacity. By progress-monitoring every student on the known drivers, targeting the highest-leverage improvements, extending the reach of counselors and teams, and knitting together a local ecosystem of colleges, families, and students themselves, they give high schools a realistic path to the outcome they are now asked to achieve: graduating every student college and career ready, on a pathway to adult success.

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