



LEARN AND EARN TO ACHIEVE POTENTIAL

Lessons from LEAP: Making Education and Career Pathways Work for Justice-Involved Youth

Angel first encountered Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) inside the East Mesa Detention Facility in California, where he was required to attend high school classes even though he had already graduated.

LEAP gave Angel an opportunity to start Back on Track postsecondary bridging work that helped him strengthen financial literacy and other life skills and explore opportunities to continue his education. His LEAP navigator encouraged him to develop a Student Success Plan for achieving his goals of a college education and financial independence - and with this road map Angel was on his way. He applied to Southwestern College and completed his FAFSA. Chronically homeless as a child, with no home outside of the detention facility, Angel applied for a 12-month housing voucher through a rapid rehousing program available through the San Diego Housing Commission. Later, at his probation hearing, he was able to show the judge his strong LEAP pathway plan, as well as the concrete steps he had already taken to establish his post-release life, and was granted early release.

In Michigan, Robert struggled academically and dropped out of high school. Convicted of a criminal offense, he was connected to LEAP as a support strategy.

With help from his Jobs for Michigan's Graduates (JMG) LEAP specialist, Robert worked on job readiness skills and a short-term game plan for following through on his commitments to his probation officer. As a result, he successfully earned release from curfew, his GPS tether, and other probation restrictions. He started GED classes with the goal of earning his GED by the end of the year and pursuing a career in construction. Recognizing the natural leadership skills he possessed, his JMG specialist began connecting Robert with different leadership development opportunities. Soon Robert was president of the Benton Harbor LEAP Career Association and participated in a statewide Leadership Day in Lansing and National Student Leadership Academy in Washington, DC, his first time flying on a plane and a huge shot of motivation to continue his education.

Systems and policies are failing to equip many young people involved in the justice system with the pathways they need to move away from the

LEAP at a Glance

WHO: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jobs for America's Graduates, JFF, MDRC, School & Main Institute, 10 local partnerships in Alaska, Arizona, California, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska and New York, and a growing coalition of funders, community-based organizations, businesses and system leaders.

WHAT: An initiative launched in partnership with the Social Innovation Fund to connect young people with postsecondary education and employment.

FOCUS: Young people ages 15-25 in the child welfare or justice system, or who are homeless. More than 80 percent of the nearly 2,000 LEAP enrollees are young people of color; 56 percent have been involved in foster care; approximately 38 percent have been involved in the justice system; more than 46 percent have been homeless; and 35 percent have been involved in multiple systems.

HOW: Adapt and scale two evidence-based models — Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) and Jobs for the Future's Back on Track.

WHY: Improve educational and economic opportunities and systems for youth and young adults.

system, secure good jobs and successfully transition to adulthood. Systemic racism only amplifies the situation for young people of color, who face huge disparities related to justice-system involvement, education, work, and leadership opportunities.

Instead of permanently sidelining young people who have experienced the justice system, local LEAP partners are working shoulder to shoulder with them, helping them cultivate their talents and aspirations and providing pathways for educational and career advancement.

This brief examines innovative strategies local LEAP partnerships are developing to support young people involved in the justice system, including ways partners are redefining institutional relationships with courts, probation offices and city and county government officials. School & Main Institute and the Casey Foundation hope these lessons improve practices and policies in and across youth serving-systems.

Five Key Lessons from LEAP Partnerships

LEAP Lesson #1

It all starts with relationship-building and trust.

Many youth with justice-system involvement often have a deep distrust of adult support systems and an eroded sense of their future potential. This can create disconnects when they step into a positive youth development and pathway-forging environment like LEAP. Organizations need to put sustained system-aware, trauma-informed relationship-building at the center of their staffing and services strategy.

For South Bay Community Services in Chula Vista, California, relationship-building and trust start with the enrollment process, overhauled last year with youth input. Youth with system involvement can find the program intake process off-putting and invasive. They may be questioned and assessed, with barely a foot in the door, before they have any relationship with staff. Intake may focus too heavily on data collection and can highlight deficits. South Bay uses more youth-friendly intake forms and stages the process carefully so that youth can share their information as they grow more comfortable and connected with program staff.

In New York, CASES JAG staff don't just teach employability workshops, credit recovery, and high school equivalency classes. Building a relationship and supporting youth with different aspects of their daily lives have become an essential part of the job description. "Our youth have asked us to come to court just to be there, not even to advocate for them. We can be their support system in these stressful, anxiety-producing situations. After court, we can be with them, take them for a meal and decompress from it all before going home," according to CASES staff. Moments like these fortify relationships, and helping youth be less anxious about their day and week frees up bandwidth they can use to focus on their future.

In Detroit, the hallmark of the Jobs for Michigan's Graduates' LEAP approach is individualized one-on-one support. Each LEAP youth has a "go-to" person they can reach anytime - but "go-to" also works in the other direction. JMG LEAP staff take LEAP services on the

road, meeting youth at coffee shops, court dates, GED program locations, job sites, or wherever they can get time together. This highly relationship-driven approach definitely has staffing implications for organizations: caseloads need to stay low and staff try to strike the right "go-to" balance between taking one-on-one support to the young person and connecting them to organizations and networks, such as leadership and peer support groups.

Across the country, LEAP partnerships have helped staff sharpen their relationship-building skills by ramping up training on the impact system involvement and other adverse childhood experiences can have on learning, connection and other aspects of a young person's life. Teams from each LEAP partnership are also working with each other and leveraging Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg's Reaching Teens curriculum, which is focused on building strength-based relationships with teens and strategies for helping youth reach their own conclusions. Often LEAP organizations extend these training opportunities to all partners so that school and college staff, workforce providers, and other adults supporting LEAP youth are working from a shared understanding and embedding the same practices within and across organizations and agencies.

LEAP Lesson #2

Stabilize so you can future-ize.

Youth with justice system involvement often have a lot on their plate. The demands and complexity of their daily lives can make it challenging to work on longer-term goals. Organizations and system partners must work together in new and meaningful ways to provide the intensive wraparound supports youth need, while simultaneously inspiring them about their future.

At Covenant House Alaska, youth involved in the justice system or experiencing homelessness often need a sustained combination of services that includes transitional housing, high school equivalency classes, addiction recovery support, and employment services. For youth-serving organizations, this has meant strengthening and formalizing public system and wraparound partnerships so youth have a fast track to services that help them stabilize. Covenant House

also makes sure support transcends basic needs. LEAP youth have plenty of opportunities to shift their focus from today's challenges to their future by engaging directly with employers and community members at clothing drives, "sleep out" events, community service projects, field trips, internships, employment certification programs, and other positive youth development activities that connect them to community networks and help them identify longer-term possibilities.

In New York, each LEAP youth served by CASES is on an individual journey, pursuing their high school equivalency diploma and employability credentials, with the full range of stabilizing services they need, delivered by a network of providers. At the same time, CASES staff are very intentional about connecting youth to their future. When they first start, LEAP youth participate in a two-week LEAP "Fundamentals" session where they get to know staff, LEAP alumni and youth further along in their LEAP experience. They also complete a project: a pitch and plan for a business they can imagine launching. The two Fundamentals weeks give youth a good taste of the learning community they are joining and what it will feel like. Later, LEAP youth can join the Jobs for America's Graduates Professional Association, a youth-driven career club that gives them a way to try goal-setting, decision-making, and leadership in a safe, supportive environment.

"After coming from a system where their decision-making power was stripped from them they are sometimes hesitant to make decisions, but they flourish once they trust their choices will be honored."
– LEAP JAG Staff, CASES

In Michigan, Jobs for Michigan's Graduates specialists function as a hub for services, coordinating a comprehensive set of wraparound supports for each LEAP youth. They have also learned that the best support often comes directly from other LEAP youth. For example, two LEAP youth who are new moms facilitate a mothers' support group for LEAP participants juggling parenting, GED attainment, and occupational training. Creative strategies like these have helped youth attach to LEAP and persist as they tackle more challenging education and training goals.

LEAP Lesson #3

Work is a basic need.

Many LEAP youth need income to meet basic needs and support others who are dependent on them. Strong partnerships take this challenge head-on, connecting youth with employment and finding creative ways to help them achieve program milestones at the same time.

"We need flexible pathways but for our youth work has to come first." – LEAP Staff South Bay Community Services, California

In New York, CASES found unpaid internships were a hard sell for LEAP youth. In fact, financial need and the pressure to work, in any job now, was one of the main reasons youth would disengage. Working with city agencies and organizations that specialize in employment for youth with justice system backgrounds, CASES has been able to increase the number of paid internships and "learn and earn" opportunities they can provide.

Similarly, in Benton Harbor, Flint, and Detroit, Jobs for Michigan's Graduates has focused its energy on strengthening employer networks in order to increase the number of workplace learning experiences available to LEAP youth, including talent tours, job shadows, onsite interview practice sessions, and summer employment positions. Working the full spectrum of workplace activities gives youth and employers opportunities to interact and get to know each other on a more personal level, which can open new doors of opportunity.

In the Southwest, Jobs for Arizona's Graduates has integrated career readiness modules and high school diploma programming into a virtual alternative school, the Leap Forward/Grad Solutions Virtual Academy in Tolleson. This allows youth who are working and youth without transportation to benefit from LEAP and build their skills, regardless of their location or work schedule. Other LEAP partnerships are also piloting flexible methods for delivering skill-building lessons and support online and via social media so that youth can access them on their own time, if their work schedule and other appointments prevent them from participating otherwise.

LEAP Lesson #4

Youth want individualized support connected to a larger whole.

Youth with justice system involvement often encounter a disconnected and gap-filled landscape of services, programs, and organizations that can be hard to understand and navigate. For youth, it's not necessarily about specific programs. It's about relationships and networks. They want coaches and connectors – adults and organizations that work across institutional lines to provide support that is personalized, integrated, and networked.

In Minneapolis, Project for Pride in Living (PPL) is working at multiple levels to bring coherence to support for youth with system involvement. Each LEAP young person has a school-based Jobs for America's Graduates specialist and a Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department youth counselor. The two work collaboratively to support the young person, joining two halves of a system brain to make a powerful whole: agency staff who understand system involvement, including the young person's specific situation and needs, and staff at the school who see the young person daily and bring employability savvy, school relationships, and employer connections to the equation.

PPL is also cultivating relationships with probation officers and has asked judges to assign particular well-fitting probation officers to LEAP schools so probation can be part of the solution rather than a potentially adversarial force. At the regional level, PPL is part of the Hennepin County Youth Employment Coalition, a group of 25 organizations and county agencies creating a more articulated system of education and employment pathways for youth with system involvement, including development of a mobile app youth can use to connect to career training and employment opportunities in the seven county metro area, including pathways open to youth with criminal records.

In California, CRCD has served system-involved youth from South Central LA for more than 10 years. Through LEAP, CRCD has refined its approach and expanded its network of agency partners and wraparound providers in order to better support the transitions and hand-offs youth experience as they move in and out of systems and into employment

and postsecondary pathway programming. This includes ongoing collaboration with Los Angeles Trade Technical College (LATTC) to streamline and strengthen campus supports for youth with system involvement backgrounds. CRCD has been working with LATTC's state-funded Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) office to change a policy that limits the number and type of youth who can receive EOPS college retention services. EOPS requires students to carry a full 12-credit course load to receive benefits. An exception rule some foster youth and veterans to take a lesser load, up to 10% of EOPS students served annually. The exception rule is now being expanded to include out-of-school youth who have experienced a disruption in education or fallen behind because of justice or child welfare system involvement, homelessness, or pregnancy.

As part of LEAP, CRCD had already started to use a staggered credit enrollment strategy. In the experience of staff, many youth take on too much too soon as first-time students, sometimes to meet the requirements of a benefit program, only to become overwhelmed and withdraw. CRCD students now develop an individualized "progressive credit" plan based on an assessment of their barriers, supports, and risk level; for example, they can start with 6-9 credits in their first semester while they establish the support systems they need, and gradually work toward a full course load at a pace they can manage. Policy changes, like the EOPS example, with aligned provider and campus supports, are a great example of organizations working together on the "whole" to better to support youth with system experience.

LEAP Lesson #5

The earlier the better.

Youth can experience big disconnects intersecting with law enforcement, the courts, and corrections. This can sometimes push them further into the system, rather than provide positive paths away. Catching them with LEAP-style programming as early as possible translates into more positive interventions and outcomes. This requires stronger connections and coordination between the courts, probation, detention facilities and CBOs.

In Chula Vista, California, South Bay Community Services

uses the Back on Track model to help youth with system involvement transition from high school to postsecondary. For a growing number of youth, the

transition begins while they are still incarcerated, thanks to a partnership with the San Diego County Office of Education’s Juvenile Community Court Schools that allows LEAP staff to work in facilities. The goal is to support youth who have already graduated from high school and use LEAP as part of their exit plan. Rather have youth sit bored in the corner of a detention facility classroom, as they had been, LEAP staff work with each young person to create a Student Success Plan, investigate career training and college resources, work on postsecondary readiness and financial literacy competencies, and line up post-release supports like housing vouchers, financial aid, and scholarships. LEAP participation – lining up a clearly defined, supported pathway to college - has become part of pre-release conversations with judges and has allowed some LEAP students to exit early and get a running start toward opportunity after they are released.

In Michigan, LEAP is positioned as an alternative sentencing option with the Genesee County Community College Court Diversion Program (GC4DP) so that youth charged with a first-time non-violent felony have an alternative to incarceration and can earn college credit for program work. This approach is modelled after the Community College of Philadelphia’s Future Forward pre-trial felony diversion pilot program, the first of its kind in the country. **Similarly, in New York, CASES** has formed a partnership with parole officers and the Friends of Island Academy to establish LEAP as a priority re-entry option for youth leaving the Rikers Island jail.

In Los Angeles, CRCD has been identified as a key transition provider by the Los Angeles County Office of Diversion and Reentry and is part of a larger collaborative facilitated by the LA City Attorney’s Office to strengthen pre-arrest diversion and alternatives to sentencing options in order to reduce the number of foster care youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system.

Implications for Policy Makers and Advocates

The experiences of LEAP youth and local LEAP partnerships underscore important areas of focus for policy makers, funders, and other advocates of system-involved youth.

- Build in stronger alignment and coordination up front between the court system, youth detention facilities and CBOs capable of providing alternative sentencing, pre-release, and/or re-entry programming.
- Identify more explicit and articulated strategies for connecting probation with organizations serving justice-involved youth in order to develop a shared youth development lens and intensive LEAP-style support strategies.
- Place a higher priority on funding “learn and earn” strategies for system-involved youth and the development of specialized partnerships with employers or employer incentives that help youth with system involvement backgrounds tap into workplace learning and employment opportunities.
- Put an intensive focus on the housing instability crisis affecting youth transitioning out of the justice and foster care systems.
- Put a higher priority on the powerful role staff and relationships play in serving system-involved youth through messaging, funding, and training.
- Pay increased attention to cross-training staff from different agencies on hand-offs, “one system” approaches that enable people within the juvenile justice system to work across internal siloes, and strong peer-to-peer mentoring efforts using youth who have transitioned successfully to life outside the justice system.

Conclusion

For youth with justice involvement, the path away from the system often isn't straightforward or linear. It takes tighter cross-system relationships, well-prepared staff, and creative personalized program delivery to provide the support these young people need to achieve longer-term educational and career pathway goals. Referring them to an education program, employment service, or college without a more articulated and networked strategy is a problematic proposition for them and for institutions working to serve them. LEAP youth are showing that longer-term pathway goals are within reach when systems work together.

For more information about LEAP, visit:
www.aecf.org/leap

Helpful Resources

Transformational Relationships and Youth Success (brief and webinar)

<http://www.aecf.org/blog/webinar-transformational-relationships-and-youth-success/>

Reaching Teens: Strength-Based Communication Strategies to Build Resilience and Support Healthy Adolescent Development (book)

<http://fosteringresilience.com/>

Get Involved: Advocates for Change in Juvenile Justice

<http://www.aecf.org/blog/get-involved-advocates-for-change-in-juvenile-justice/>

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