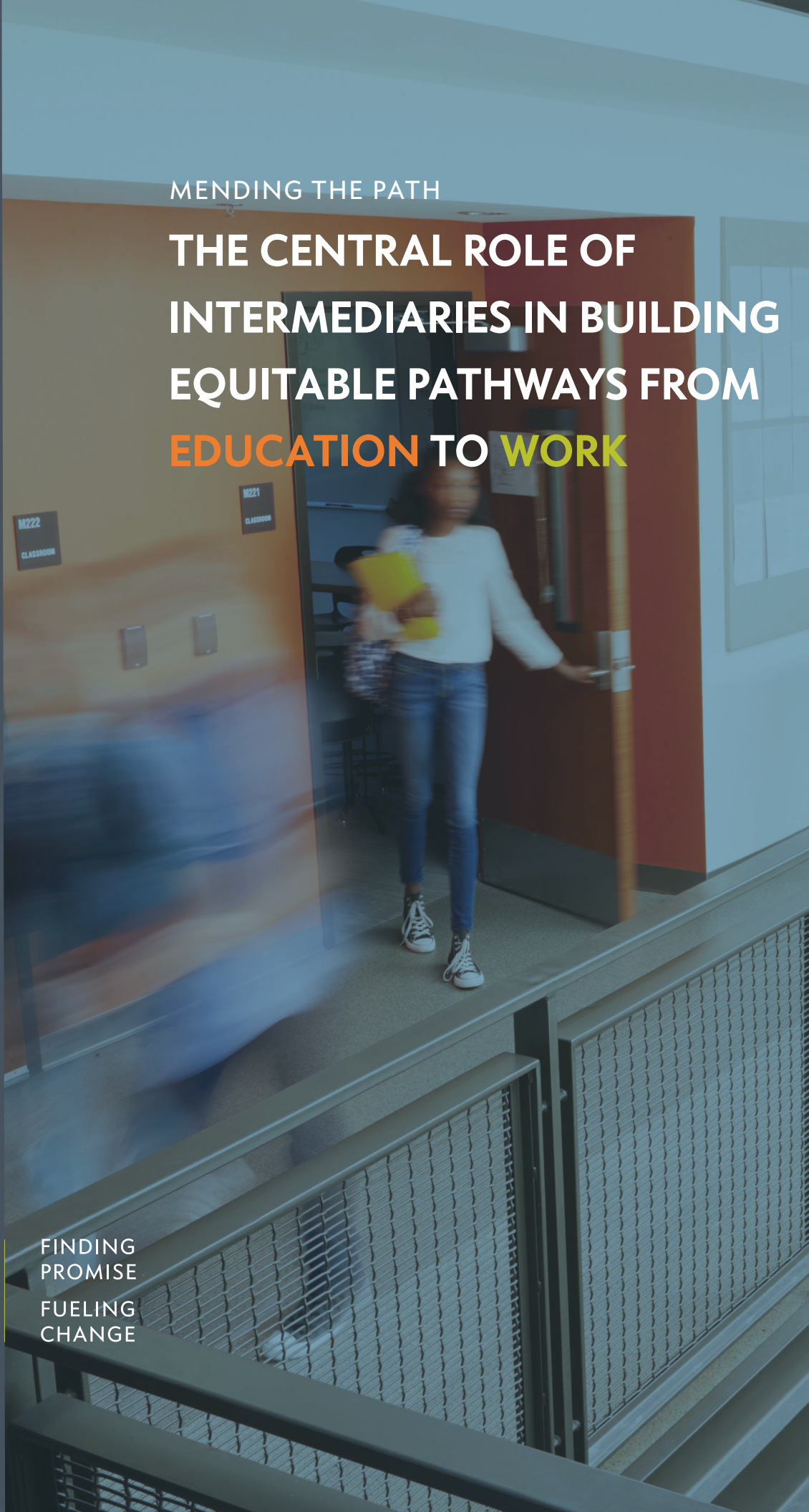




Issue Brief
June 2023

MENDING THE PATH

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES IN BUILDING EQUITABLE PATHWAYS FROM EDUCATION TO WORK



EQUAL
MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE
FUELING
CHANGE



INTRODUCTION

Stories of pursuing the “American Dream” often involve a seamless, predictable transition from school to college and, ultimately, to a well-paying, family-sustaining career. But across the United States, the links between K-12 schools, postsecondary education, and employment are fundamentally broken. Too many young people – particularly learners of color and learners experiencing poverty – are failed by fragmented systems and policies that do not support their transitions from high school into adulthood. The ways in which our current education and workforce systems operate produce disparate outcomes and perpetuate disadvantage for Black and Latine¹ youth and maintain our inequitable economic system.²

The school-to-work system must be reimagined so that all young people have access to equitable opportunities and experiences that connect their education and training with local job markets. Many institutions offer interventions and supports to learners along their education-to-career path, but they are too often siloed in one part of the system and do not ensure smooth transitions between systems.

Pathways intermediaries are organizations playing a critical leadership role in forging a new system in which K-12, postsecondary, and workforce partners collaborate to create equitable pathways, sets of integrated structures and supports for helping learners successfully navigate from high school to a career with upward mobility.³ This issue brief synthesizes findings from Equal Measure’s learning engagement with the 15 intermediary organizations that make up the Building Equitable Pathways (BEP) Community of Practice funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and from a survey of a subset of the intermediaries and their sector partners.

We need leadership to bring systems together to mend broken education and career pathways. Pathways intermediaries are playing that role.

Pathways Intermediary:

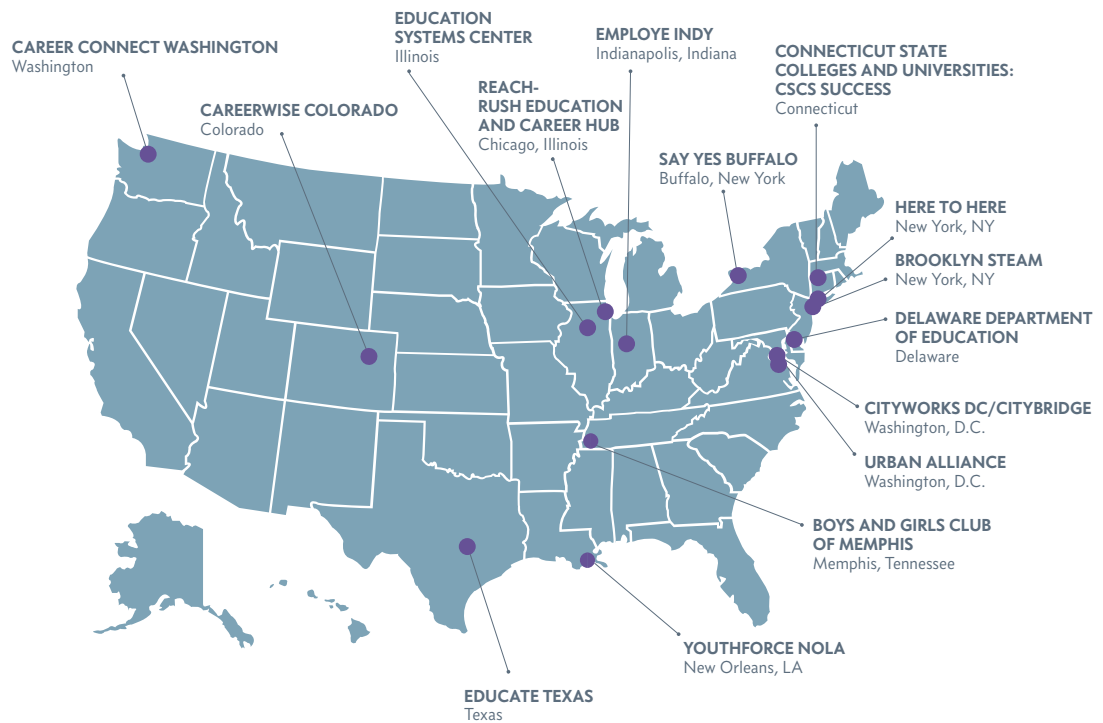
The non-profit organization, workforce development board, higher education institution, initiative within a larger organization, or other entity that provides leadership and management capacity to enable sector partners to execute their individual and collective roles in pathway programming.



BUILDING EQUITABLE PATHWAYS

Equal Measure’s work is situated in the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Equitable Futures portfolio, which aims to increase access to and participation in multiple high-quality local pathways that improve credential completion and drive positive labor market outcomes for learners who are “Black, Latino, and/or experiencing poverty.” To reach this goal, the foundation invested in the development, validation, and codification of exemplary models of pathways intermediaries that are connecting K-12 and postsecondary education with the private sector by coordinating and aligning education and career pathways. Equal Measure’s data collection and analysis examined intermediaries who participated in the Building Equitable Pathways (BEP) Community of Practice facilitated by JFF between fall 2019 and spring 2023. Other partners supporting this initiative included Evan James Consulting, the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness, and Center for Innovation in Education. For more about the Community of Practice, visit <https://www.jff.org/what-we-do/impact-stories/building-equitable-pathways/>

FIGURE 1
Building Equitable Pathways
Community of Practice Organizations



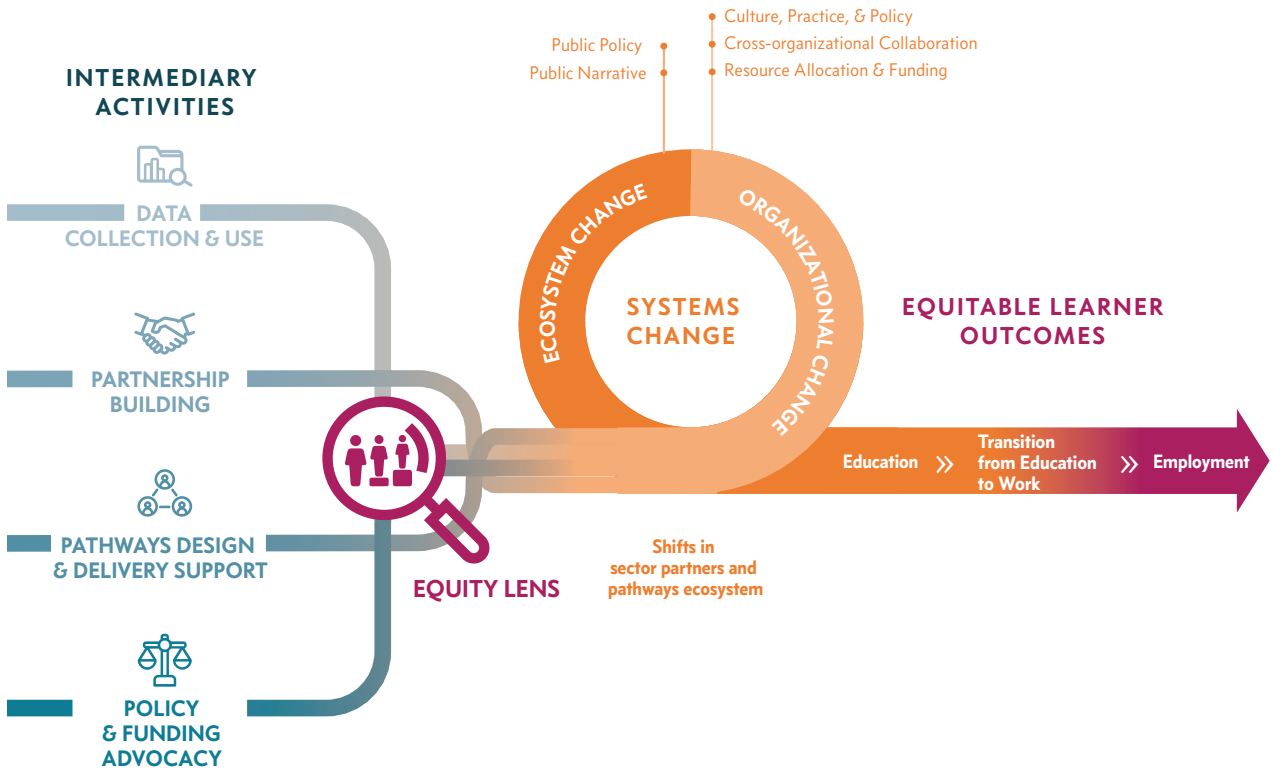


INTERMEDIARY-LED PATHWAYS: A ROADMAP FOR ADVANCING EQUITY

To mend the pathways from high school to family-sustaining work, pathways intermediaries (intermediaries) are working with their partners to imagine a different future — one where all learners from all communities obtain skills, credentials, and networks that allow them to thrive in school, the workplace, and beyond. Intermediaries are building and leading new pathways by conducting a broad range of activities designed to build state, regional, and local collaborations among sector partners and shift policy and practices within and across organizations to achieve this future.

Qualitative data collection and analysis led by Equal Measure engaged two cohorts of the BEP Community of Practice and informed the development of the **Equitable Pathways Intermediary Framework**. The framework articulates **31 intermediary activities in four key categories** (*Data Collection and Use, Partnership Building, Pathways Design and Delivery Support, and Policy and Funding Advocacy* with *Equity* cutting across these), connects the activities to **five areas of systems change** among sector partners (*Culture, Practice, and Policy; Cross-organizational Collaboration; and Resource Allocation and Funding*) and in the broader pathways ecosystem (*Public Policy and Public Narrative*) that lead to **20 improved and equitable learner outcomes** across **three categories** (*Education, Transition from Education to Work, and Employment*). The figure below provides a graphical representation of the framework.

FIGURE 2
Equitable Pathways
Intermediary Framework Overview





What did we learn through testing the framework?

To better understand the impact of these activities and their connection to emerging systems changes, as well as the perception of intermediaries' partners on the importance and effectiveness of the intermediaries' activities, Equal Measure administered a survey based on the framework to the staff and partners of nine unique BEP intermediaries during 2021 and 2022. Survey findings suggest:

- **Intermediaries serve a core function in their pathways ecosystems, holding a multitude of roles and responsibilities.** The survey findings reinforced equity-oriented *Data Collection and Use*, *Partnership Building*, *Pathways Design and Delivery Support*, and *Policy and Funding Advocacy* as the core activity domains of intermediaries. Respondents rated each framework domain between “important” and “extremely important” for intermediaries to conduct.
- **Sector partners rated intermediaries as effective across the activity domains.** Partners provided positive feedback on the work of intermediaries through their ratings of effectiveness. *Policy and Funding Advocacy* was rated the most effective area of intermediaries' work. Effectiveness ratings appear to be influenced by partner type and geographic scope of the intermediary. K-12 partners typically provided higher effectiveness ratings than postsecondary and employer partners. Staff and partners of local and regional intermediaries rated effectiveness in all activity domains significantly higher than statewide intermediaries.
- **Intermediary staff and sector partners see evidence that intermediaries are influencing conditions that enable equitable pathways.** Partners shared several examples of change they have experienced through their work with intermediaries. Examples include changes in practices (e.g., changing hiring practices, providing transportation to learners, and implementing feedback systems), policies (e.g., issuing credit for internships and loosening requirements for bringing on apprentices), and narratives (e.g., valuing equity and diversity and shifting ideas about their role in the ecosystem). Intermediaries also supported partners' capacity to engage in pathways work – including recruiting learners, sharing resources to support learners, and facilitating connections to other organizations. Survey findings revealed that the relationship between intermediary activities and systems change—especially ecosystem change—is still emerging. While complex systems change takes time to manifest, intermediaries are finding more immediate success in shifting the organizational culture and practices of sector partners.

An analysis of learner outcomes data was not an element of the Equal Measure study, yet we explored multiple sources to determine the types of learner outcomes intermediaries and their sector partners monitor.

Improved and equitable learner outcomes diminish race and class as predictors of educational attainment and career success.

- **Intermediary-led partnerships often track community-level outcomes focused on education, transitions from education to work, and employment.** Our investigation revealed a great deal of variation in the learner outcomes that intermediaries monitor, related to local context. Primary factors include local, state, and federal requirements for which data K-12 and postsecondary institutions collect – and related to this, availability of and access to data. Differences in pathways focus and design also inform prioritization of the types of data that intermediaries and their partners collect or track. We learned that monitoring learner outcomes, with an emphasis on disaggregated data by race and ethnicity, is a critical contribution of intermediaries and helps hold partners accountable to building equitable pathways.



ON THE HORIZON: A VISION FOR STRONGER INTERMEDIARY-LED PATHWAYS

Intermediaries in the BEP Community of Practice commonly address four domains of activities, and equity practices cut across their work. We hypothesize that when intermediaries address these domains, with a focus on equity, systems changes will follow over time. These systems changes will enable improved and equitable learner outcomes.

Based on our learning from the BEP Community of Practice, we find that intermediaries and their sector partners have struggled with creating data infrastructure, centering the voices of learners and their families in more meaningful ways, fully engaging postsecondary and employer partners, and charting a course for the sustainability of their activities across the pathways ecosystem. Breaking through common roadblocks can expand opportunities for intermediaries to deepen their impact. Funders, technical assistance providers, evaluators and researchers can help intermediaries overcome challenges in their pursuit of leading equitable pathways, achieving the key tenets of a strong and equitable intermediary-led pathways model outlined below.

- 1. Data infrastructure is robust, showing the progression of learners across systems and the longer-term outcomes of meaningful employment and career progression in high-demand fields.** Funders can incentivize the interaction of data across organizations and systems involving the co-creation of shared measures while evaluators and researchers build a story of pathway effectiveness that connects data from multiple sources and sectors.
- 2. The voices of learners and their families are elevated in partnerships' decision making, policy advocacy, and in the creation and refinement of pathways.** Technical assistance providers can explore with intermediaries how they can more meaningfully engage learners and families, particularly in ways that would influence decision-making or pathways refinement. They can bring learners and families into spaces where intermediary organizations are receiving technical assistance or learning from peer organizations.
- 3. All sector partners, including K-12 institutions, postsecondary institutions, and employers, engage meaningfully with and invest resources toward the intermediary and the partnership to create better pathways for learners.** Funders can prioritize cross-sector collaboration and an explicit focus on partnership building through investments and initiatives while technical assistance providers present high-interest topics in offerings that engage representatives from K-12, postsecondary, and the private sector.
- 4. Pathways intermediaries have the financial stability to effectively perform core activities in their local, regional, and state ecosystems.** Evaluators and researchers can conduct studies on the importance and impact of investing financially in intermediary organizations while funders connect intermediary organizations to funding sources new to them, particularly sources outside philanthropy.

Intermediaries face common, persistent challenges in collecting and using learner data, engaging learners and sector partners in meaningful ways, and diversifying revenue. Funders, technical assistance providers, evaluators and researchers can help intermediaries break through these roadblocks, expanding opportunities for intermediaries to deepen their impact.



CONCLUSION

Intermediaries across the U.S. are leading cross-sector partnerships to forge shared visions of local pathways that result in more learners who are Black, Latine, and/or experiencing poverty gaining education credentials and family-sustaining employment. These organizations come in various shapes and sizes, and there is no one organization type or business model that determines an intermediary's effectiveness. Intermediaries pay attention to the local, regional, and state contexts in which they operate as they prioritize their connections and activities with partners.

To build more equitable pathways systems, equity must be the driving force guiding the individual and collective efforts of intermediaries, their sector partners, and other influential actors at the local, regional, and state levels. Without a joint, coordinated effort to increase equity, systems will continue to fail learners of color and learners experiencing poverty. We expect that more intensive equity-minded practice within communities will prompt organizational and ecosystem changes that benefit learners. The intermediaries in the BEP Community of Practice are working to “mend the path” along a fractured system so that more learners can get to where they want to go in their education and career journeys.





NOTES

¹ Equal Measure has chosen to use the term “Latine,” which adopts the letter “e” from the Spanish language as a representation of gender neutrality. It is the latest effort by Spanish-speaking populations to describe all people using their own lexicon. Source: <https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/hispanic-latino-latinx-latine>. We acknowledge other terms, including Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx, are currently used more often in philanthropy and broader U.S. society.

²Education Strategy Group and Level Up (2020). From Tails to Heads: Building Momentum for Postsecondary Success. <https://edstrategy.wpengine.com/resource/from-tails-to-heads/>; Gonzalez, N., Alberty, E., & Brockman, S. (2022). Education-to-Workforce Indicator Framework: Using Data to Promote Equity and Economic Security for All. Mathematica. <https://www.mathematica.org/publications/education-to-workforce-indicator-framework-using-data-to-promote-equity-and-economic-security>; Lewis, K. (2022). A Disrupted Year: How the Arrival of Covid-19 Affected Youth Disconnection. Measure of America, Social Science Research Council. <https://measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2022/>; Smith, E., Tsin, D., Rogers, E. (2019). Who Will Succeed in Tomorrow’s Job Market? Bridging the Soft Skills Gap for a More Equitable Talent Pipeline. Urban Alliance. https://theurbanalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UA_WP2019_Who_Will_Succeed_in_Tomorrows_Job_Market.pdf

³Education First (2022). How Do Intermediary Organizations Support Stronger Pathways Systems? A National Landscape Scan. https://www.education-first.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Full-Report_Pathways-Intermediaries-Landscape-Scan_Education-First_June-2022.pdf; JFF (2020). Intermediary Functions and Features in Pathways Systems. <https://www.jff.org/resources/intermediary-functions-features-pathways-systems/>



EQUAL
MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE
FUELING
CHANGE