



# IN THEIR WORDS: WHY BUSINESS LEADERS SUPPORT CTE, CAREER PATHWAYS & CAREER ACADEMIES

**ADVANCE**  **CTE**  
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work

 **FORD  
NEXT GENERATION  
LEARNING**   
Education Innovation



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## ABOUT ADVANCE CTE

Advance CTE: State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work is the longest-standing national non-profit that represents State Directors and state leaders responsible for secondary, postsecondary and adult Career Technical Education (CTE) across all 50 states and U.S. territories. Established in 1920, Advance CTE supports visionary state leadership, cultivates best practices and speaks with a collective voice on national policy to promote academic and technical excellence that ensures a career-ready workforce. [www.careertech.org](http://www.careertech.org)

## ABOUT FORD MOTOR COMPANY FUND AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Ford Motor Company Fund and Community Services works with community and global partners to advance driving safety, education and community life. Ford Motor Company Fund has operated for more than 65 years with ongoing funding from Ford Motor Company. Ford Driving Skills for Life is free, interactive, hands-on safety training focused on skill development and driving techniques, while addressing inexperience, distractions and impaired driving. Innovation in education is encouraged through Ford Blue Oval Scholars, Ford Driving Dreams, Ford Next Generation Learning and other innovative programs that enhance high school learning and provide college scholarships and university grants. The Ford Volunteer Corps enlists more than 30,000 Ford employees and retirees each year to work on local projects that strengthen their communities and improve people's lives in more than 40 countries around the world. For more information, visit <http://community.ford.com>



## INTRODUCTION

Partnering with employers and the business community is one of the most important elements of high-quality Career Technical Education (CTE) and yet employer engagement remains one of the most persistent challenges faced by state and local CTE leaders. As articulated in *Putting Learner Success First: A Shared Vision for the Future of CTE*, the business community must play an active role in CTE programs, in part because “schools and postsecondary institutions cannot provide high-quality career pathways on their own. They must rely on partners, especially employers and community-based organizations, to augment and supplement learners’ experiences.” More specifically, *Putting Learner Success First* identifies critical roles for employers in ensuring the quality and relevance of CTE programs, such as “validating standards, informing course development and credentials of value, and helping provide the full spectrum of work-based learning experiences for learners.”<sup>i</sup>



Despite the natural relationship that should emerge between CTE programs and the business community in their surrounding regions and states, many CTE programs continue to struggle with engaging employers in a meaningful and sustained manner.

One reason this engagement remains so challenging is that business leaders do not always see the value in being “co-investors” or “co-owners” of the CTE system, particularly at the secondary level. While they may understand these programs will field their talent pipeline, oftentimes, their support for CTE is considered to be part of their corporate social responsibility portfolio — an act of charity. This can be exacerbated by the fact that some educators only approach business leaders for financial support or to play a limited role on an advisory committee. Too few employers truly see support for CTE as a way of helping their bottom line in terms of recruiting skilled employees and adding productivity.

However, there are bright spots. In some communities across the country, particularly those whose high schools have built strong systems around their CTE pathways, the culture has undergone a shift, with business leaders fully understanding and embracing their role in supporting and strengthening CTE programs, pathways and career academies. In these communities, employers are considered full partners in contributing to a community-wide, collective impact.

To capture what this support looks like in practice, Advance CTE, in partnership with Ford Next Generation Learning, hosted two roundtable discussions with employers and business representatives in Nashville, Tennessee and Pinellas County, Florida. Participants represented a full array of employers — from small business owners to executives at multinational corporations, as well as leaders from industry associations, business-education partnerships and economic development agencies. Through their involvement in Ford Next Generation Learning communities, these business leaders are part of community-wide efforts to transform their education systems around career pathways and career academies. What follows are some common themes and lessons that emerged from those roundtable discussions.

## OVERVIEW OF FORD NGL COMMUNITIES & THEORY OF TRANSFORMATION

Ford Next Generation Learning (Ford NGL) mobilizes educators, employers and community leaders to prepare a new generation of young people who will graduate from high school ready for college, career and life — prepared to compete successfully in the 21st century economy.

Ford NGL blends the expertise of stakeholders within and across communities. Three distinct but interconnected strands comprise the Ford NGL framework, which enables whole communities to design and carry out a long-term plan for revitalizing education using the career academy model.

1. *Transforming Teaching and Learning*: Creating meaningful experiences that enable students to learn and apply academics, 21st century and technical knowledge and skills to real world challenges and that equip them for success in their future.
2. *Transforming the Secondary School Experience*: Creating and maintaining the career and interest-themed academies and the collaborative culture, structure and practices necessary to transform teaching and learning and to capitalize on community engagement.
3. *Transforming Business and Civic Engagement*: Engaging employers, educators and community leaders in building and sustaining transformed secondary schools that promote community growth and prosperity to preparing students for future work and citizenship.

Ford NGL encourages communities to collect data on improvements that result from implementation of the career academy model, such as graduation rates and academic test scores, which result from leveraging the value of great CTE programs to bring relevance to academic course work through project based learning and teacher teaming.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER-TO-PEER RECRUITING

“The Pinellas  
Education  
Foundation was  
instrumental in  
getting me into  
this whole thing.”

When discussing how business leaders first got involved in CTE programs or career academies, a consistent theme was that many of them became engaged as the result of a strategic “ask” from other employers in their community. This outreach may have come from a trusted partner or organization, such as a chamber of commerce, a business-supported intermediary organization, like the Pinellas Education Foundation, or directly from another employer in the same sector.

While some employers noted they first became involved because their children were enrolled in local schools or through other existing relationships with the schools, peer-to-peer recruitment was universally considered to be very effective, particularly as peers were the best positioned to frame the ask in the right way.

In Nashville, key partners “divided and conquered” to coordinate their outreach of business partners. The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, PENCIL (Public Education Needs Community Involvement and Leadership), Alignment Nashville and Metro Nashville Public Schools coordinated who would reach out to which businesses based on existing relationships and organizational capacity.



## IN THEIR WORDS

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER-TO-PEER RECRUITING

“Who makes the ask is very important.”

“The original ask was made by Nashville Chamber and Nashville Technology Council. Nashville is an IT hub and we don’t have enough people to fill the jobs and wanted to better prepare them for workforce so it made sense.”

“When business partners start working together and they begin to put aside their own territorialism for the greater good, it’s no longer isolated. It creates safe places for open dialogue.”

“We invite them to something that is low commitment...And for those who appear to want more, we set the hook.”

## EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT AS A TWO-STEP PROCESS

“I got asked to be a judge for the computer programming competition...I didn’t know what I was getting myself into when I said, ‘we can do this better.’ Now I’m on the Pinellas Foundation Career Board.”

A challenge often cited by schools and educators is engaging employers — and engaging them meaningfully. One theme that emerged from the roundtables was the importance of starting with a small, isolated ask, making sure that first engagement was well structured and meaningful, and then asking for a deeper level of engagement.

For example, the Pinellas Education Foundation has a process where they recruit upwards of 200 members of the business community to conduct site visits of their 17 high schools and six middle schools twice a year and evaluate them using a common rubric. This is one of their most successful recruitment strategies as many of those employers — who start by volunteering only half a day — have gone on to join school advisory committees, offer work-based learning experiences or even serve on the Foundation’s Career Education Board.

This two-step process builds trust and allows both the school and employers to get more strategic. By giving employers a quick glimpse into a district, school, academy or program, they may be more apt to come up with creative ways to increase their involvement. Critically important, employers universally agreed that the first ask should never be about financial resources, but about building the relationships.

Another example of how this two-step process can work comes from a company in Nashville. Initially, a company decided to offer a job shadow experience and select students after reviewing their resumes. Upon receiving the first batch of resumes, they found that the resumes were lacking because most students had no experience writing one. This led to the company partnering with a school to build out a resume writing exercise. Over time, this initial commitment of offering job shadows has evolved into an ongoing program that elicits over 125 applicants for 15 positions, includes partnering with English teachers on resume writing skills and sends employees into the partner high school to conduct mock interviews.





## IN THEIR WORDS

### EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT AS A TWO-STEP PROCESS

“It’s OK to start small — you can work through processes and then grow over time. You need to give business permission to learn and even say this does not work for us or an aspect of their support does not work.”

“It has gotten more strategic. [My company] started off thinking this is just a good thing to do and as they become more involved, they see more opportunities.”

“You cannot ask for money with these partnerships — that’s a hard and fast rule. No more asking for money — it must be about people and resources.”

## STRUCTURE MATTERS

“For most businesses it is a very different partnership. I’ve been engaged for 20 years and usually it was about a photo or check. It was never about talent and human resources until now.”

Business leaders want any engagement activities to be well-structured — starting with recruitment, placement and then ongoing support. They want clarity on what role they can play and what the impact of their engagement will be from the outset.

Both communities invest in and leverage intermediary organizations to coordinate much of the employer engagement — such as PENCIL and the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce in Nashville and the Pinellas Education Foundation — and the employers universally cited these organizations as critical to their ongoing involvement and overall satisfaction of their engagement. Specifically, employers felt intermediaries could protect them from being “bombarded” by competing or redundant requests directly from schools or teachers, and provide a clear line of communications for any questions they may have. While such intermediaries require an investment of resources, it was an investment that was well worth it from the perspective of the business leaders.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of the roundtable participants actually served in intermediary roles within their own organizations — formally or informally coordinating their companies’ relationship with the academies. In some cases, they were simply employers who became champions for the work and sought to formalize their companies’ engagement.

Another way that structure matters to the employers is around feedback loops. A number of participants spoke about the importance of having structured ways of providing input — and then having evidence that their time and input is having an impact — beyond traditional isolated advisory committee meetings.



## IN THEIR WORDS

### STRUCTURE MATTERS

“The success that we have is because we are involved — from advisory committee members, speakers on the board to manufacturer champions. We even took 100 school counselors on a bus tour. So how did that happen? What happened is, we built relationships. And the way that you build them is you deliver on both sides, business and education. You have to be deliberate about what you expect from the person getting involved. That’s for everybody but especially with the business people...but I think to be successful you need this person who can coordinate this relationship.”

“The value proposition has to be communicated. During meetings, etc. advisory leaders should go around the table and learn what is going on in that industry. Feedback must run both ways.”

“Our real secret is the students themselves.”

## LET STUDENTS SELL ENGAGEMENT

“One of the students spoke about academies and that was my first exposure to it. I had skepticism just because I didn’t know if middle school and high school students should be thinking about their careers that early. But that skepticism was completely overcome.”

Although peer-to-peer engagement as well as leveraging intermediaries for recruitment can both be effective strategies, a number of employers spoke of the tremendous value of having students be part of the recruitment process. Student involvement can be key to overcoming two barriers to employer engagement — the stigma associated with CTE as well as concerns over high school students’ maturity and ability to thrive in a professional setting.

Both Nashville and Pinellas deploy student ambassadors to serve as spokespeople within the schools and in the broader community. A few employers noted that it was meeting some of these ambassadors that convinced them to become engaged.



## IN THEIR WORDS

### LET STUDENTS SELL ENGAGEMENT

“Our real secret is the students themselves. Each one of our academies has designated ambassadors. [In] every single one of those meetings, we have ambassadors from those academies who talk about the academies, what they are doing and what it means to them. You get a topical sense of how enthusiastic these students are with what they are doing. Having good ambassadors and looking for additional opportunities for these ambassadors to give the presentations that they do. That’s what keeps people coming to meetings.”

“There are programs that already exist in your communities that are wonderful programs. Just bring [employers] to one of your programs. I promise you, if they are interested, they will continue. Like this morning’s program where students spoke, I guarantee you we’ll get calls. I got three emails already about how can I get involved.”

“Success is really all about making a difference in students’ lives.”

## COMMUNITY INVESTMENT AND WORKFORCE INVESTMENT

“Workforce development is a big issue for us; we cannot afford to have so many students without a job or a future.”

Employers often become engaged in education for two purposes — to support their community and to strengthen their future pipeline of qualified employees.

Many of the employers at the roundtables talked about the importance of investing in their community from the perspective of ensuring all students have access to high-quality pathways that promote opportunity. In Nashville, in particular, a number of the employers cited student-level outcomes (such as ACT scores, graduation rates and attendance rates) as well as more intangible positive outcomes (such as opportunity and lifelong success for students) as the ways in which they measure the positive impact of their involvement in schools.

In addition, the business leaders also wanted to be part of something that could have a major positive impact on their community at large. For example, prior to The Academies of Nashville strategy, the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce worked primarily on education policy and school board governance, but saw the opportunity to support a system-wide transformation of teaching and learning that aligned with their goal of making Nashville attractive to companies and potential employees who may relocate to their communities. Core to the recruitment effort in both Nashville and Pinellas County is selling engagement as an opportunity to be part of a community-wide initiative.

While some employers might become engaged initially to support their community, as their involvement becomes more strategic (the second step in the “two-step process”), they see greater inroads in their workforce development strategy. For example, some employers discussed how they have gone on to hire high school students as interns or part-time employees and found them to be as skilled or productive as other employees due to their preparation in the academies.

Still other employers saw their involvement as a longer term workforce investment, even if they weren’t hiring interns. Some noted that building stronger technical and employability skills for students at earlier ages was a key part of their workforce development strategy.

“Some employers who get involved are focused on community responsibility and that’s great. But if you want to get more employers involved they want to see a return on investment. And to me that translates to work-based training programs. Whether it is after school or during the summer, they need to be getting that hands-on experience with the employer.”



## IN THEIR WORDS

### COMMUNITY INVESTMENT AND WORKFORCE INVESTMENT

“ACT scores and graduation rates rising — gang rates are down. We recruit people from out of town — so schools must look good to new employees.”

“I have six interns. I wish I could tell you how much of a blessing they are to our company. They bring youth, activity. Ours carry their weight, and we ended up hiring one. We get a return in skillset. Plus we get great ideas. They come in, have a job description and go through the same procedures as any other employee.”

“Attendance rates rising and graduation rates rising and students who want to come to school because they enjoy their academies. Students excel when they are engaged.”

# THE BUSINESS CASE

Roundtable participants shared their opinions on the “business case” for how to most effectively recruit employers to engage around CTE and education more generally. A couple of key themes emerged:

## HAVE THE RIGHT PITCH – AND BE SPECIFIC IN THE ASK

“If a business is being asked to come in, there needs to be a hole, we need your business to fill this hole. If you can’t have that explanation then you’re just going to have people come to meetings. And they’re going to be too busy to go to meetings unless they know what their role is going to be.”

## HAVE THE RIGHT MESSENGER

“Having the right person who knows somebody in the business. Because that is going to be the person you talk to and they are going to know how to tailor that presentation because different employers are going to have different reasons why they are going to be involved.”

“You need to have the right pitch and the right messenger. You may not want the teachers and principals to make the pitch. Making a really great first impression is important.”

## LEVERAGE THEIR COMPETITIVENESS

“Our pitch to businesses was telling them that you know your competitors are at the table learning about the workforce of the future, and providing resources for those folks getting a leg in. We start as it being a competitive advantage. Make it competitive.”

## BUT ALSO APPEAL TO THEIR INTEREST IN COLLABORATION

“When you are part of something, you become proud to be a part of the school or academy.”

“The benefit of planning and collaboration is knowing that the students walk away from the experience being deeply impacted.”

“We do need to continue to work on measurements and we also just need to be comfortable in making leaps. Using statistics, public perception, etc. to determine success. We measure outputs but not a whole lot of outcomes yet.”



# A COLLECTIVE CHALLENGE: MEASURING THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT

While employers in Nashville and Pinellas could identify many reasons for and benefits of supporting CTE, career pathways and career academies in their communities, no employer had yet to begin to measure the full return on investment of their commitment at the individual company level. A few employers are beginning to track how many students they are taking on as interns and eventually hiring, but this is largely in the earliest stages and not all employers offer extended internships or hire students directly out of high school.

However, the roundtable participants largely were unconcerned with having this measure at their disposal because most considered the school- and district-level outcomes as the return on their investment, even if it could not be calculated for their individual company.

Rather, it was actually some of the economic development and intermediary organizations that expressed the most urgency about figuring out how to best measure the return on investment for employers, seeing it as a critical marketing tool for those still unconvinced. As one participant said, “We see companies who have a bottom line want to invest — they must think it is successful. Their engagement shows us that it is an important factor and they want to back a winner.”

As they shared multiple times throughout the roundtables, the employers were satisfied with and proud of the observable impact their involvement was having in their communities, or with the schools or pathways they supported. This is a testament to how these employers see themselves as full partners in the community-wide effort and beneficiaries of having a high-quality system in place that supports career success for all students.

## FINAL WORDS

Nashville and Pinellas County are recognized by Ford Next General Learning as model communities for a reason. Both of their efforts are built on strong and comprehensive strategies co-developed and co-owned across sectors, with incredible and sustained business involvement. However, the themes and lessons that emerged from the two roundtables absolutely are applicable in other communities as they consider their own employer engagement activities and should serve as inspiration for such efforts.

## ABOUT NASHVILLE ACADEMIES

Beginning in 2006-2007, Metro Nashville Public Schools, the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, Alignment Nashville, PENCIL (Public Education Needs Community Involvement and Leadership), Nashville Alliance for Public Education, the office of the mayor and Ford Next Generation Learning joined together to create a strategy to build out a district-wide high school redesign initiative around career academies. This strategy, first laid out in a five-year plan, is now fully implemented and impacting the 24,000-plus high school students in Nashville.

The district employs wall-to-wall academies, meaning every high school student in the district is enrolled in an academy of his or her choice in one of the 12 zoned high schools in the district. In total, there are 41 academies. Students have the option of selecting their school before entering 9th grade and then select their academy and pathway before they enter 10th grade. Between 2010 and 2015, the graduation rate rose from 73.1 percent to 81.6 percent. Attendance rates are up to 93 percent and discipline incidents down by 11,000 in 2014.<sup>ii</sup>

The Chamber organizes five industry-based Partnership Councils, the CEO Champions committee and an annual career exploration fair, which serves all incoming freshman. PENCIL recruits and coordinates volunteers and in 2014-15 alone, there were about 350 business and community partners involved in the academies in some capacity. And, Alignment Nashville serves as the overall coordinating hub for all things Academies of Nashville.<sup>iii</sup>

## ABOUT PINELLAS COUNTY ACADEMIES

In 2011-12, Pinellas County Schools, the Pinellas Education Foundation and Ford Next Generation Learning formed a partnership to explore how to support student success and district transformation. A five-year plan was developed, which established the Academies of Pinellas and set goals for promoting higher career academy enrollment, increasing student-earned industry certifications and expanding wall-to-wall academies in Pinellas County High Schools.

Today there are over 50 Academy of Pinellas programs across the 17 high schools in the county. Every high school has at least one academy, while most high schools have multiple academies and some are wall-to-wall academies. Students in the county have flexibility in which school and academy they attend. In total, about 53 percent of Pinellas students are engaged in either academies or magnet programs, about 27 percent of whom graduate with an industry-recognized credential.<sup>iv</sup>

The Pinellas Education Foundation, a coalition of business and community leaders who work together to improve the quality of public education, launched the Career Education Board (CEB) in 2007 to enhance access to career education and academies. Since the launch of the five-year plan, CEB oversees the community's involvement in the Academies of Pinellas program, including organizing industry site visits of high schools, career exposure activities and a district-wide career planning web platform.

<sup>i</sup> *Putting Learner Success First: A Shared Vision for the Future of CTE*. [www.careertech.org/vision](http://www.careertech.org/vision)

<sup>ii</sup> Alignment Nashville Annual Report 2015. <http://portal.alignmentnashville.org/documents/10191/0/Alignment-AR-2015-web.pdf/b876b53c-e75b-4e60-a0da-aa6f61f1dc058>

<sup>iii</sup> Academies of Nashville 2014-15 Annual Report. [https://issuu.com/academiesofnashville/docs/14-15\\_annual\\_report](https://issuu.com/academiesofnashville/docs/14-15_annual_report)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.pinellaseducation.org/students/career-education/the-academies-of-pinellas>

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