JFF

LESSON 1:

Set a Vision to Guide the Future

Launching and Sustaining Early College Pathways at Charlestown High School

AT A GLANCE

Starting a new early college initiative is complicated. Drawing from the experience of high school and college leaders involved in the launch of C-Town Pathways, this report outlines strategies to bring partners together around a shared vision and non-negotiables. Starting with a strong unified vision allows for iteration and builds a foundation for future growth and sustainability.

AUTHORS

Sheila Jackson
Associate Director, **JFF**

Joanna Mawhinney
Program Manager, **JFF**

AUGUST 2021

Acknowledgments

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For nearly 40 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About the Series

Three Big Lessons in Six Years is both a reflection on the past and a look ahead to the future at Charlestown High School and other early college programs across the country. The purpose of this series is to document essential design elements, operational structures, and critical support for students to be successful. It also presents an authentic view of the troubleshooting required to overcome key initial challenges.

The lessons—*Set a Vision to Guide the Future*, *Build a Framework That Allows for Structure and Flexibility*, and *Build a 'Both/And' Team*—represent three integral parts of C-Town Pathways' journey. It has evolved from a small pilot to a formal, replicable approach that defines and distinguishes CHS within the district—and laid the foundation for a future school redesign process. The lessons also highlight both philosophical and practical questions and, most important, solutions that have since provided the school's staff with nuanced understanding, confidence, and convictions about how to best support students through an early college model.

The three resources in the series can be read as standalone deep dives into key elements of C-Town's model and operations, with a focus on transferable lessons. We see these resources as helpful to practitioners, especially school leaders who are interested in early college pathways and program staff who provide advising and work-based learning support. We also see these documents as useful to both private and public funders as they consider key elements of quality and success when investing in grantees.

In documenting the clarity that comes with hindsight, but also the inevitability of learning as you go, our hope is that educators feel empowered to take informed risks while avoiding some of the growing pains and challenges CHS experienced along the way.

Table of Contents

Start with a Common Vision

Starting a new early college initiative is complicated. It requires bringing together many partners that have different needs and priorities to work toward a common goal: providing high school students with the opportunity to earn college credits that will set them up for success in their postsecondary journeys and future careers. During the startup phase of a new early college initiative, it is useful to begin by setting a common guiding vision and determining the team's non-negotiables. With a vision and non-negotiables firmly in place, it becomes much easier for the team to navigate decisions about design elements of the program. This allows the core team to move past the startup phase more quickly, articulate a definition of success that aligns with the school's unique priorities, and solidify a foundation for future growth and sustainability.

This was one of the most important lessons learned by the school leaders who launched C-Town Pathways (C-Town), a partnership between Charlestown High School (CHS)—a large, open enrollment high school in Boston Public Schools in Massachusetts—and the nearby Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC). JFF, a national intermediary based in Boston, only a few miles from CHS, has led early college high school initiatives across the country, and has been fortunate to serve as a close partner and intermediary supporting C-Town Pathways from day one. JFF staff have worked side by side with CHS and BHCC staff, to convene meetings, develop strategic plans, create resources, and attract funding, and have even attended field trips with students. This role has provided a unique understanding of the leadership, mindset, and commitment necessary to stand up early college pathways.

Since the launch of the school's first early college pathway focused on Information Technology (IT) in 2015, the school has added two additional pathways, Business and Health, and enrollment has grown to roughly 125 students across grades 9 to 12. Today, C-Town defines success by its ability to open doors for students, bolstering students' sense of self-efficacy to pursue college and a range of careers and empowering them to make decisions about their future. While access and equity are at the core of the school's current efforts to scale its vision, in the early stages of the initiative, it was not a through line across all aspects of program design. This piece outlines key events during the first two years of C-Town Pathways, as well as the resulting program decisions and iterations of the model, which ultimately shaped the school's vision for early college pathways.

Connect the Vision to Non-Negotiables

Early college initiatives seldom come with the ideal amount of information, personnel, or detailed operational plans at the start. They do, however, often come with an influx of new funding from grants or other sources, which means the work and activities need to begin quickly. This tension between the need to plan carefully and the need to dive in often characterizes startup mode. As a result, most leaders must figure out how to adopt programming or models wholesale, rather than taking time to examine the different implications of the model and determine which aspects best align with the intended outcomes and school context.

In the case of CHS, the school was approached by global software company SAP in 2014 to sponsor and help co-design the school's first early college pathway, Information Technology. The funding from SAP propelled the startup phase of the C-Town Pathways initiative, led by a core planning team comprised of the school's headmaster, a few CHS science and math teachers, representatives from BHCC, and the city of Boston's first chief of education. JFF served as the local intermediary and strategic advisor.

Introducing an early college pathway at CHS was a continuation of the school's tradition of offering progressive programs to meet a range of student needs. For instance, the school currently offers small learning communities, a competency-based credit recovery program, and a comprehensive set of special education supports. However, school leaders also had hopes for the early college model to serve as a new recruitment tool that would boost enrollment as well as increase overall academic performance and rigor schoolwide. This would be no small feat considering the steady decline in enrollment during recent years and CHS students' low test scores relative to state averages.[1]

The desire to use the early college pathway as a recruiting tool put pressure on school leadership to build buy-in and enthusiasm within the district and at feeder middle schools. The core planning team also had to convince CHS administrators and teachers that it would be possible for incoming grade 9 students to be dually enrolled as college students. Consequently, the early days included few discussions of the long-term vision, as the core planning team operated under the assumption that C-Town Pathways should emulate traditional early college models in which students aim to earn a full associate's degree by the time they graduate high school. However, starting with this approach to implementation soon led the team to realize that its vision for success was different, and it needed to design an early college model that promoted a much broader set of goals and student outcomes.

The core values of CHS—recognition and celebration of diversity; high expectations and high support; and collaboration and community—provide a window into the school's longstanding commitment to access and equity. While these core values did not explicitly define the primary motivation for implementing early college at the beginning, their relevance became more apparent as the team pivoted to better serve students. As a result, access and equity became the formal guiding principles for future design choices. A prime example of how equity and access served as implicit guides was the choice to focus on IT over computer science. Community college faculty showed that, while computer science is a high-demand field leading to careers with relatively higher wages than IT, students in the pathway could face significant barriers if they did not meet the requirements for higher level math courses such as calculus. IT also provided more options for students who earned associate's degrees or certificates, or chose to enter the workforce directly after high school. When faced with that trade-off, CHS's

> ## Start With the Non-Negotiables
>
> School leaders should lean into established core values and familiar non-negotiables for their school community to provide a foundation for their early college vision of success.
>
> This vision may be refined over time, but it will provide a crucial anchor for the work, inform key decisions, maintain momentum amidst staff turnover and healthy iteration, nurture collaborative relationships across institutions, and keep students at the center.

commitment to access and equity made it easy for the C-Town team to prioritize the option that increased employment opportunities rather than inadvertently creating barriers as students progressed through the pathway. That said, C-Town Pathways is intentionally flexible, so students can—and do—choose higher level courses, like computer science, while still being exposed to a range of broader educational and career paths within the tech industry. Read more about how the team achieved this balance between structure and flexibility in *Lesson 2: Build a Framework That Allows for Structure and Flexibility*.

This focus on access and equity also drove decisions about summer bridge programming and work-based learning. Since many CHS students rely on part-time jobs in retail and food service, school leaders thought it was important that students did not have to turn down pathway-focused career development opportunities because they were unpaid. The C-Town Pathways team felt strongly about 1) offering stipends to students that participated in any summer bridge programs and 2) connecting students to paid work-based learning opportunities. The team also knew that admission criteria like GPA requirements or a burdensome application process would work counter to its priorities. In fact, the planning team often used the unofficial tagline of "no barriers to entry" to reinforce priorities focused on inclusivity and student excitement about

joining the pathway. In hindsight, these examples demonstrate that access and equity were, in fact, non-negotiables in C-Town's vision for an early college pathway. However, like many initiatives in the startup phase, they were considered on a case-by-case and iterative basis instead of being used to design a full-scale decision-making framework on day one.

Examine How the Vision Influences Student Experiences

Decisions made in the startup phase don't always stick, particularly as lessons are learned through implementation. Rather than sticking to choices made with limited information, it's more important to have a consistent vision and non-negotiables that guide the team in making decisions about what changes need to be made. For C-Town, the core principles of equity and access were intrinsically linked to a commitment to placing students first and making adjustments that reflected their experiences.

The C-Town Pathways team's first big lesson was realizing that grade 9 was too early for students to have a firm grasp on all the requirements and expectations of being in a college-level course. During the first year of implementation, it became evident that grade 9 students enjoyed the content of the dual enrollment course, but its rigor and pacing were barriers for many. Although the school offered an optional summer bridge program to rising grade 9 students, it was difficult for staff to do outreach at all feeder middle schools, so several students enrolled in the pathway without the benefit of an orientation to early college.

Even though a select number of students in the first cohort excelled, there was significant attrition in the pathway between grades 9 and 10, and in response, the C-Town team developed exploratory grade 9 electives in IT and in Business (at the same time it launched the second early college pathway for Business). These electives gave students more time to explore the content and better understand program expectations before formally committing to a pathway. While waiting until grade 10 for students to begin their dual enrollment courses meant they would "lose" a year to accumulate college credits, the team knew there was greater risk in students leaving the pathway and starting their college transcripts with failing grades.

After the initial pilot, the C-Town team evaluated progress to ensure that the program aligned with the stated goals and expected outcomes among school partners, as well as students and their families. The team saw that in order to keep as many students as possible in the pathway, they needed to prioritize increased engagement and more extensive wraparound supports at critical transition points, in lieu of accelerating dual enrollment to maximize credit accumulation. This clarity set the stage for the team to design the pathways experience so that in

the later high school years, students could balance industry-specific courses with general education and elective courses offered at the college.

Use Design Principles to Guide Collaboration

Even though partners may have differing priorities, ensuring that all partners agree on a shared vision can alleviate tensions and help stakeholders arrive at solutions and compromises more efficiently. In the case of C-Town Pathways, while BHCC and CHS agreed that dual enrollment courses should begin in grade 10, they were not aligned on which campus these courses should be offered. CHS preferred a scaffolded approach where students progressed from their pathway electives to their first dual enrollment course still on the high school campus, while BHCC advocated in favor of offering dual enrollment courses at the college.

In many early college models, dual enrollment courses are exclusively taken on the college campus and high school students are fully embedded in the general college population, often taking courses on weekends and evenings depending on when available sections are open. Certain data support this approach and suggest that students are more likely to reap all the benefits of an early college experience, such as direct matriculation to postsecondary institutions following high school, greater accumulation of credits during high school, and better attendance while immersed on the college campus among young adults.[2]

Offering dual enrollment courses on the high school campus instead of the college campus also typically requires more work for the college. The college must perform separate or additional recruiting processes to hire an instructor that is willing to both come to the high school to teach courses and has the experience and interest in teaching high school students. Meeting enrollment thresholds can also be a challenge if the college is creating a section of a course to accommodate the high school's schedule.

From the high school's perspective, having the students on the high school campus meant staff could more readily provide wraparound supports and students would be more comfortable reaching out to advisors with whom they had existing relationships. CHS saw the scaffolded approach as a clear way to uphold its commitment to equity and access—even if it meant compromising fidelity to the early college model—and staff felt strongly that allowing students to progress from exploration to dual enrollment while still on the high school campus could promote student success and retention in the pathway.

Although the two institutions had to navigate a challenging conversation about how to balance the requirements of the evidence-based early college model with concerns about access and equity, including student retention, they were ultimately able to achieve a compromise. After

grade 10, C-Town Pathways students would take dual enrollment courses on the college campus at regularly scheduled time blocks. However, the two institutions could have saved time if they had clearly established and agreed upon design principles. Understanding non-negotiables can support intentional and strategic decisions when building early college pathways, but establishing design principles still requires a healthy process of iteration. Over time, the natural evolution of the model time is likely to spur additional thinking about and refinements to the program design.

Continually Refine the Program Design

Understanding your non-negotiables and establishing principles for design can support intentional and strategic decisions when building early college pathways, but that will not replace the necessary process of iteration and continuous improvement. In fact, the natural evolution of the model over time is likely to spur additional thinking about and refinements to the program design.

As iteration helped clarify design principles, CHS staff was able to introduce and operationalize program features that had not been considered before but that aligned with the overall vision for early college at the school. For instance, in year three, the C-Town Pathways team added more foundational "college knowledge" content and topics like time management and self-advocacy into dual enrollment courses. This process included using grant funds to hire a consultant to develop curricula and lead a series of college 101 workshops. The team also restructured students' schedules to include study hall blocks in which they had time to complete assignments for dual enrollment courses as well as receive general support like troubleshooting tech platforms and preparing for upcoming tests. Last, C-Town staff members found that celebrating milestones along the pathway—whether students completed their first or sixth college course— and including families in these celebrations also allowed them to honor equity and access while improving student recruitment and retention.

Develop Messaging to Communicate the Vision

Messaging is critical to help students, families, and other stakeholders understand the purpose of the program and drive student recruitment and retention. While equity and access informed early programmatic choices for C-Town, they were not explicitly reflected in the school's internal or external messaging and marketing materials about the program. Staff did not have a consistent approach to communicating the numerous benefits of early college, the number of credits students could expect to earn, and most important, what they could do with those credits once they graduated. After the pilot year, staff quickly learned the value of messaging that clearly outlines the value of early college, incentives, and key features for keeping students

engaged and committed and families informed enough to support students throughout the pathway experience.

Set Clear Expectations and Reinforce the Vision

Marketing materials and website content are important tools for setting realistic student and family expectations for an early college pathway. C-Town's marketing materials center on the message of helping students become "empowered to make decisions," reflecting the program's focus on equity and access, as well as other benefits like boosting participants' self-confidence. It took time for the C-Town team to develop and evolve this language and its mission statement before it was ready to craft external-facing materials. In fact, shifts and iterations in program design (like introducing grade 9 exploratory electives) helped the C-Town team hone key details in its descriptions of early college pathways and create further options for participating students as the pathway scaled.

At the conclusion of year two, staff remarked on the positive impact of just one or two dual enrollment courses on students' self-confidence, level of maturity, and ability to talk about future career interests. This growth in a relatively short period of time made it clear that C-Town's definition of success for its early college graduates would be less focused on the number of credits they earned and more focused on giving students tools to understand their interests, talents, and identities in relation to future careers. Additionally, as the team began to see and understand the developmental benefits of early college experiences, it was better positioned to integrate career exploration and work-based learning more formally as core features of its model and student experience.
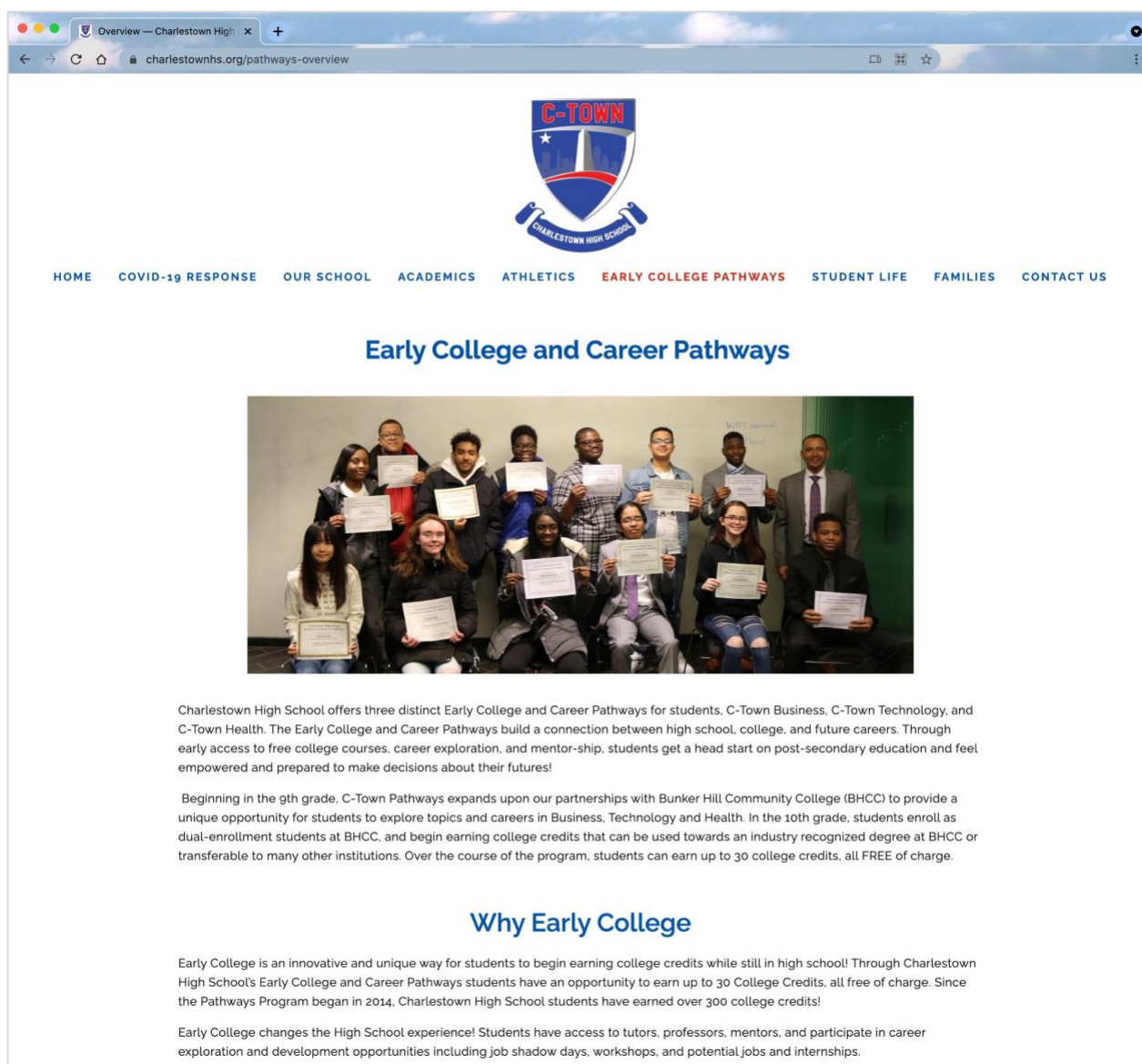
Craft Mission and Vision Statements

In addition to being useful for external communication with students, parents, and the community, the process of developing a mission statement can help a core planning team to more clearly articulate or update its goals. Crafting these materials with college and nonprofit partners can also help reaffirm commitments and ensure alignment.

At C-Town, many subtle details are now reflected in official statements on the school's website: "*Through early access to free college courses, career exploration, and mentorship, students get a head start on post-secondary education and feel empowered and prepared to make decisions about their futures.*" Characterizing the experience as a "head start" rather than a path to earning a full associate's degree in high school was an important guide for staff as the pathways scaled. Highlighting that students can earn "up to 30 credits" is an intentional phrasing designed to convey the maximum number of available credits while also signaling that the C-Town Pathways program is designed to accommodate a range of student journeys.

Simple but significant shifts in messaging such as this came from frequent and nuanced conversations that both honored the organic evolution of the program and set intentional goals for students and staff. Taking the time to articulate and document goals and intended outcomes—even through basic exercises such as having staff complete the phrase, "At the end of four years, students will…"—can help teams distill the most compelling, bottom-line benefits of early college to feature in public-facing materials.

Today the C-Town Pathways website reflects these updated expectations and intended student outcomes for the school's three pathways in IT, Business, and Health (*see image of the website below*).

Conclusion

New initiatives are often described as building a plane while flying it. Fortunately, starting an early college high school pathway allows plenty of places to refuel, refit, and refine the approach. School leaders can take comfort in adopting a model of early college that has proved to have positive student outcomes. Moreover, the hundreds of early college programs and thousands of early college graduates across the country over the past two decades provide a blueprint for the key elements of the model.

However, despite the many best practices that educators can learn from, the C-Town Pathways story underscores that establishing design principles of early college pathways will often require iteration to fully reflect a school's core values and priorities. Educators should make time for the creative and challenging work of articulating a shared vision and establishing a list of non-negotiables, testing which programmatic details best help the school realize its vision, and then crafting messaging that successfully communicates the vision in a way that is compelling to students and parents.

The next lesson in the series, *Build a Framework that Allows for Structure and Flexibility*, examines the contributing factors that led to the need for more detailed advising tools and breaks down the process used to develop them. The third lesson, *Build a 'Both/And' Team*, outlines how CHS started with preexisting school staff before assembling a dedicated pathways team to strategically sustain and grow early college pathways and support students. Taken together, these lessons provide a comprehensive overview of the accomplishments and the lessons learned by the C-Town Pathways team as it adapted the early college model to meet its specific goals.

Endnotes

[1]"MCAS Tests of Spring 2014," Charlestown High School, School and District Profiles, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, accessed May 26, 2021, https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/achievement_level.aspx?linkid=32&orgcode=00350515&fycode=2014&orgtypecode=6&.

[2] Cecilia Speroni, "Determinants of Students' Success: The Role of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment Programs," National Center for Postsecondary Research working paper, 2011, www.postsecondaryresearch.org/i/a/document/19811_Speroni_AP_DE_paper_110311_FINAL.pdf.