

# REAL WORLD LEARNING

How Community  
Agreements Mobilized a  
Regional High School  
Transformation Initiative

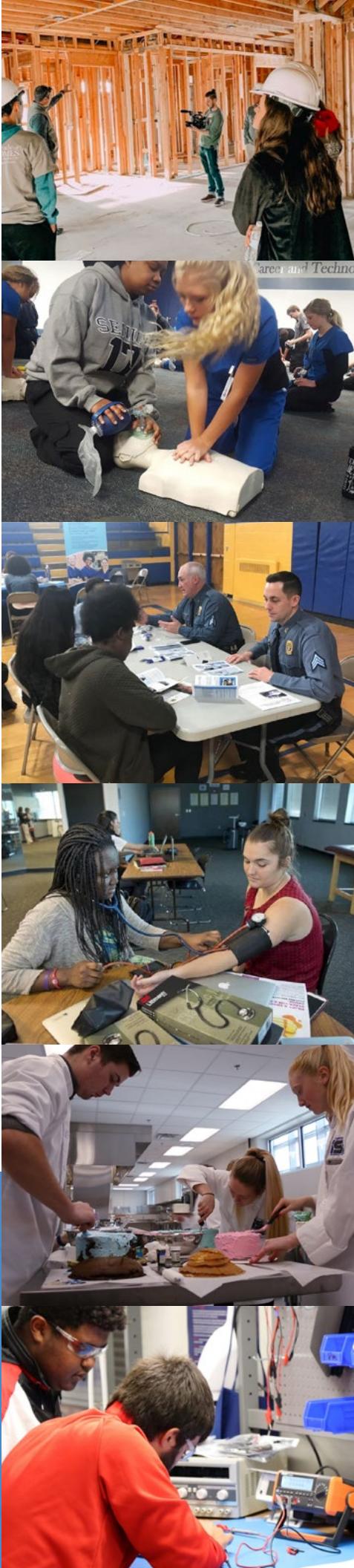


A case study prepared by  
**Getting Smart** with support from the  
**Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation**  
October 2021



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **Real World Learning Initiative**, sponsored by the **Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation**, is the largest and most promising regional high school improvement project in the country. Formed in Kansas City, a region known for its thriving entrepreneurship landscape, Real World Learning provides schools, businesses, and community organizations with ways to connect with each other and create learning opportunities for students.

Starting with an equity lens, the Real World Learning Initiative set out to create agreements that provided a relevant personalized education for each student in the KC metro area. With the goal in mind of creating equitable access for students through meaningful connections and authentic learning experiences, stakeholders came together to build a framework that would prepare students for life after high school.

Activated by community agreements about learning priorities and invitations from one education leader to another, Real World Learning (RWL) grew into a regional initiative that not only crossed state lines and traditional education-business boundaries, but also had a wide urban, rural, and suburban reach. Supported by small grants, a web of technical assistance, and a series of professional learning opportunities, Real World Learning proved itself an attractive proposition and a well-timed, well-supported initiative.

The goal of the Real World Learning Initiative is to ensure that all students in the Kansas City region graduate, by 2030, with one or more valuable experiences called Market Value Assets (MVA), including:

- **Work experiences: internships and client-connected projects**
- **Entrepreneurial experiences: starting a business or launching an initiative**
- **College credit: at least nine credits**
- **Industry-recognized credentials**

In the midst of a global pandemic, the class of 2021 was the first to benefit from expanded and enhanced learning opportunities as part of the first wave of Kansas City area high schools to participate in the Real World Learning Initiative.

## Initiating Real World Learning

Kansas City community conversations about the opportunity for more applied learning and better workforce preparation began in 2016. The Kauffman Foundation sponsored a **landscape analysis** of career and technical education, published in 2017. This report highlighted experiences valued by employers (Market Value Assets), and it informed conversations about what graduates should know and be able to do.

Community leaders and educators across the Kansas City region, from Missouri and Kansas, came together in 2019 to create a set of regional agreements that prioritize valuable learning experiences. The goal was to provide access for high school students to engage in rich, meaningful, and significant career-related experiences. Responding to industry leaders' desire to have more prepared and local talent, superintendents worked together to align the student experience to the workforce needs of the region.

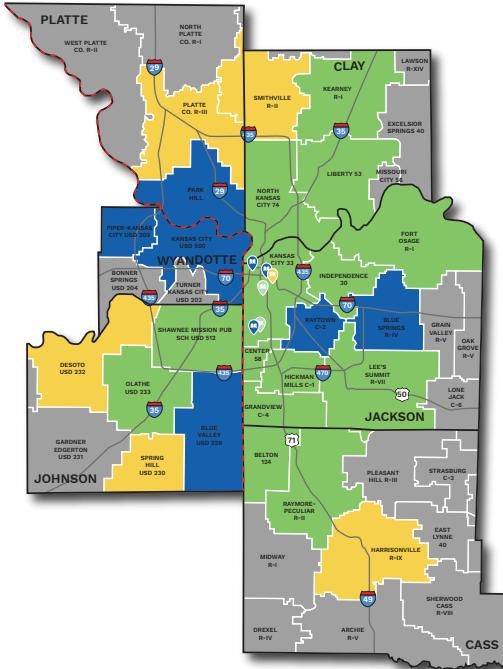
Determining that a high school diploma was no longer enough, superintendents argued that by attaining MVAs, students would have a clearer picture of what pathway to follow and how they want to be contributing members of their community. Students who possess marketable skills blended with intentional essential skills development would have a fuller portfolio of experiences to showcase after high school.

Equipped with planning and implementation grants and supported by local and national technical assistance providers, school systems mobilized to create sustainable change. Supported by more than 600 business and civic partners to provide internships and project connections, districts created teams made up of all stakeholders to determine baseline data, goals, obstacles, and innovative solutions. The pandemic presented new challenges for the Real World Learning Initiative, and districts adjusted to provide students with the same opportunities, moving some of them to a virtual format.

# Real World Learning

## KC METRO COHORT MAP

This map highlights the 30+ school districts - in the six-county metro - engaged in The Real World Learning initiative. They represent approximately 83,000 students in the metro. Each district is color coded to represent their onboarding into the work via three cohorts.



### COHORT 1 (GREEN)

Received grants in the summer of 2019 to support a RWL Design and Plan year and will begin implementing their plans in the 2020/21 school year.

### COHORT 2 (BLUE)

Received their RWL Design and Plan grants in 2020 and will begin implementing their plans in the 2021/22 school year.

### COHORT 3 (YELLOW)

Received their RWL Design and Plan grants in early 2021.

Indicates Charter School

### COHORT 1

Belton | Center  
Fort Osage | Grandview  
Hickman Mills  
Independence  
Kansas City Public Schools  
Kearney | Lee's Summit  
Liberty | North Kansas City  
Olathe | Raymore-Peculiar  
Shawnee Mission

DeLaSalle | Hogan Prep

### COHORT 2

Blue Springs  
Blue Valley  
Park Hill  
Piper  
Raytown

University Academy  
Crossroads Academy  
Guadalupe Center

### COHORT 3

DeSoto  
Harrisonville  
Kansas City Kansas  
Smithville  
Springhill  
Platte County

Kipp Endeavor Academy

To date, there are three cohorts of grantees that include more than 75 participating high schools from 31 different systems, potentially impacting more than 82,000 students. This year, after a year of planning and a year of implementation with strong support, the first class from the first cohort of RWL grantees graduated with the benefits of a richer set of learning experiences.

While early in deployment, the Real World Learning Initiative has achieved remarkable community support and school mobilization. It appears to be an efficient change-making strategy that could be replicated in other regions. It may also be possible to use a similar combination of community agreements around compelling goals with planning grants, technical assistance, and professional learning to mobilize opportunities in other areas of education and human development.

# A HISTORY OF REGIONAL COLLABORATION

The Kansas City region is home to over two million people. Most of them live in six counties, four in Missouri and two in Kansas. This diverse region is served by 100 high schools with about 100,000 students.

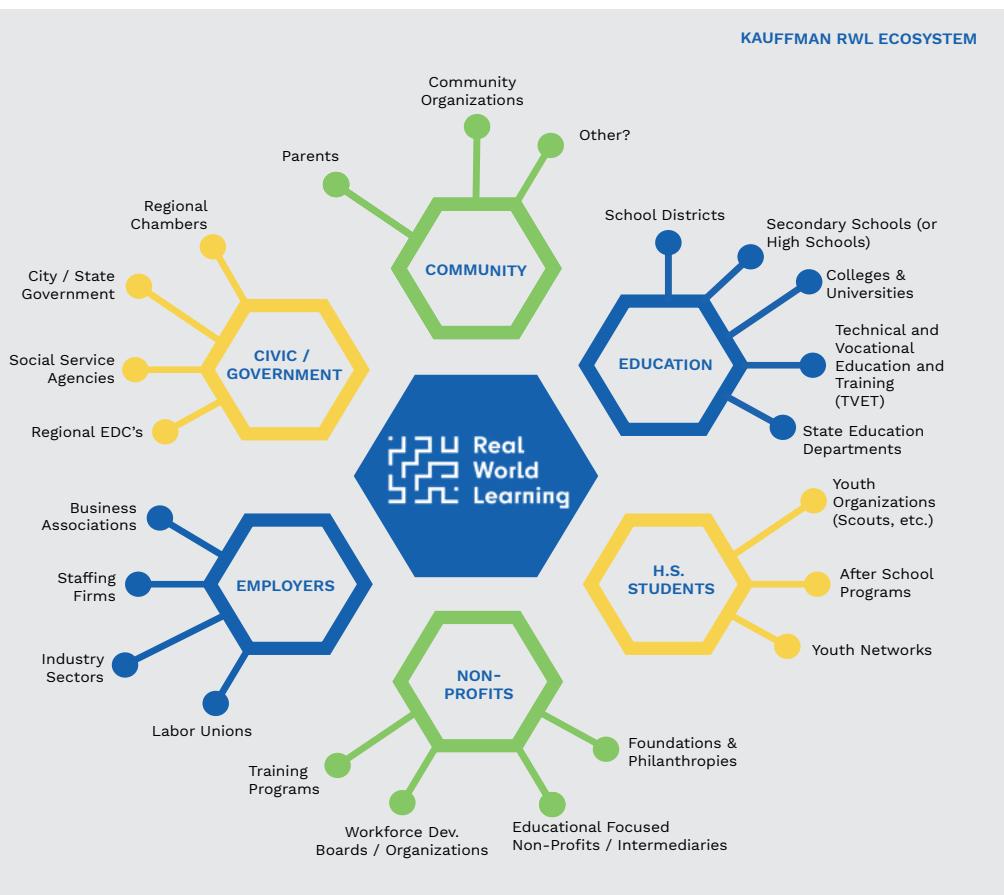
Despite straddling the state line, there is a strong history of regional collaboration. The **Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce**, the **Mid-America Regional Council (MARC)**, the **Kansas City Area Development Council**, the **Civic Council of Greater Kansas City**, and its **KC Rising** initiative have all set a tone of shared prosperity and collaborative problem-solving. The collaboration within the business community also provided a strong foundation for RWL. Large employers like **Cerner**, **Black & Veatch**, and **Burns & McDonnell** were just a few that helped build successful long-term relationships between businesses and district superintendents.

In the education space, **PREP-KC** has worked with urban school districts across the region since 2006 to improve college and career preparation.

In 2009, the **Blue Valley School District** in Kansas opened the **Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS)** to expand access to immersive Real World Learning experiences for high school juniors and seniors. Several years later, the district shared this innovation with Missouri students, and Northland CAPS and Southland CAPS opened. In the last two years CAPS has formed a **national network** of more than 75 affiliate districts to promote Real World Learning.

Since 2011, **KC STEM Alliance** has supported improved STEM education across the region and has grown into a nationally recognized model for supporting K-12 STEM education, particularly the effective use of the **Project Lead The Way (PLTW)** curriculum.

Understanding the regional landscape with assistance from partners laid the foundation for crafting a new framework for students. To begin moving toward the goal, the Kauffman Foundation created shared experiences to help educators and community members envision new possibilities. Through both virtual opportunities and in-person gatherings,



## Real World Learning Visits by the Numbers

- More than **500 community members** including teachers, school and system leaders, civic and faith leaders, and business and nonprofit executives
- Visited more than **300 places of learning** in **15 states and the District of Columbia**
- More than **100 meals shared** together
- More than **85 community partner conversations**

participants spent time analyzing educational needs, learning together from local leaders, and engaging in school visits to see best practices.

The school visits allowed attendees to see a broad range of educational innovations and to consider what could be implemented within the context of the Kansas City region. Attendees typically included teachers, school and district leaders, school board members, civic and faith leaders, and business and nonprofit executives. During each visit, groups learned from five to eight entities ranging from regional initiatives like **Dallas County Promise**, to schools where interest-based community connected projects drive learning like **Iowa Big** in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Most visits included a mix of elementary and secondary schools, district and charter schools, and new and transformed schools. The goal of the visits was to showcase strong examples of each MVA component: work experiences, entrepreneurial experiences, college credit, and industry-recognized credentials.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, school visits pivoted to virtual experiences that continued to provide participants with a chance to study the most innovative learning models, witness in-depth views into practices such as student internship programs and community-connected projects, and gain fresh perspectives by asking questions and thinking deeper.

Over the last five years, with support from the Kauffman Foundation, more than 500 community members from the greater Kansas City metro area have visited more than 300 schools and community organizations.

## REGIONAL AGREEMENTS AND MOBILIZATION

In 2016, leading civic organizations, including the **Mid-America Regional Council**, hosted workforce development conversations in Kansas City. This led to broad considerations of what high school students should know and be able to do, as well as the development of a regional "Portrait of a Graduate."

To enrich community conversations, in 2016 the Kauffman Foundation began sponsoring school visits for community members: teachers and administrators, parents and school board members, business and faith leaders, mayors and nonprofit leaders. Through **Show Me KC Schools**, hundreds of community members visited America's best schools and shared images of powerful learning experiences.

In 2017, Susan Wally, CEO of **PREP-KC**, a regional academic support partner, observed that students who graduate with a diploma and valuable experiences, or MVAs – including college credit, industry-recognized credentials, internships and entrepreneurial experiences – have a leg up on those who leave high school with just a diploma.

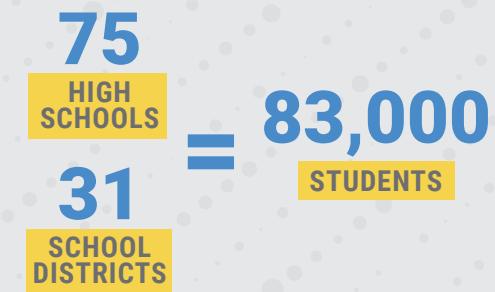
After joining the Kauffman Foundation as an Educator in Residence in 2017, Donna McDaniel published a report on **The State of Career and Technical Education** where she reiterated the importance of these valuable experiences or MVAs. "We chose experiences, MVAs, versus skills, to focus on, due to the fact that you can 'see' and count them more consistently than the skills," McDaniel said.

**KC Rising**, a regional economic development initiative that includes members from all sectors, partnered with stakeholders in 2019 to develop a **landscape analysis** of the Kansas City experiential learning opportunities. The findings helped identify the gaps where students needed support to achieve career readiness. The study also identified trends, provided recommendations, and shared participant feedback from the region that informed the work of Real World Learning.

The research of PREP-KC, KC Rising, and other national reports informed the development of the Real World Learning Initiative with a plan to scale MVA experiences for all students – a workforce solution customizable by school and student.

The insight to focus community agreements on real-world experiences proved to be a key lever. McDaniel knew that educators would be quick to say, "We already teach communication, collaboration, and problem-solving." While true,

### Real World Learning by the Numbers



important skills may have been taught in isolation with little application outside the classroom. Prioritizing student experiences made rollout plans more specific and rallied the support of community partners who knew where and how to help.

From the beginning, the design of the Real World Learning Initiative was a set of regional decisions amplified by superintendents: three turned into seven within a month, while the rest was organic growth based on compelling goals and trusted relationships. Within two years, the conversation expanded to 400 community stakeholders including business, civic and faith leaders, parents, students, and educators.

The initiative has achieved strong early mobilization as a result of regional support for timely, compelling goals, a strong equity focus and a flexible framework that allows schools to adopt strategies in their own way. McDaniel calls it a "loose/tight change theory: tight on results of 100% students graduating with one or more regionally defined MVA, and loose in appreciating the districts' ownership of the how/what strategies for achieving 100% of students."

While the equity-focused Real World Learning Initiative was just ramping up when the pandemic hit, students from dozens of Kansas City area high schools engaged in internships, client projects, and entrepreneurial experiences (many of them virtual) and gained college credit and industry credentials. Kansas City area districts also coordinated remote and hybrid learning strategies to boost reliability and quality.

To achieve the greatest regional impact, the representation of rural, urban, and suburban schools was emphasized as a way to ensure equitable access. Having a set of agreed upon regional guidelines allowed all districts, regardless of demographics, to provide authentic experiences using the program's criteria and measurement tools.

Plans are underway to transform high school experiences for all students in the region. Schools have launched new career academies with built-in internships and client projects, embedded engaging experiences in required courses, created microschools, and expanded access to college credit courses and entrepreneurial experiences.

## Microregion Creates Equity Through Collaboration

What can small districts with only one high school offer their students? Three districts that make up the South Kansas City region were determined to answer this question. In communities with these small districts, change can be slow and difficult. With only one school to provide a diverse set of resources, and a higher percentage of low-income families, districts like these often find equitable access challenging. In the South Kansas City region, the three diverse suburban districts of **Center School District**, **Grandview C-4 School District**, and **Hickman Mills C-1 School District** united to form a micreregion of change.

All three are in suburbs without a lot of access to industry outside of sparse retail and warehouse entities. Each district understood the need to forge better business partnerships and create varied pathway options. Students leaving to go off campus isn't a new concept, but sharing students across multiple high schools in competing districts allowed districts to combat the challenge of a large transient population and established more equitable practices.

This collaboration not only increases equity, but allows districts to share costs, transportation, teachers, facilities, and equipment. They are also not charging each other tuition for serving a student who is not in their district. Challenged by not having the same resources as other large districts and the size of their student enrollment, the micreregion pooled their strengths to create a **Pathways to Design program**. In the program, students from each of the districts learn together with the assistance of postsecondary support and a common teacher, hired from industry. Students who complete the Pathways to Design programs are eligible to sit for an industry-recognized credential and become Adobe Certified Associates. Gaining the industry-recognized credential, one component of the MVAs, prepares students for postsecondary opportunities.

The program credits its success to collaborative conversations, incorporation of advisers from **PREP-KC** and the **Kauffman Foundation**, and innovative leadership. These schools recognized that joining forces doesn't mean losing individuality, but gaining equity and opportunities for all students. With plans to incorporate public safety, advanced manufacturing and performing arts pathways in partnership with the **Metropolitan Community College**, the micreregion is committed to capitalizing on commonalities in order to continue creating more programs for students.

## THE CASE FOR REAL WORLD LEARNING

Real World Learning is a response to talent gaps in the economy – both the 10 million good paying jobs that remain unfulfilled and the countless unfulfilled entrepreneurial opportunities to better serve communities. The preparation gaps are biggest in historically marginalized groups – those furthest from opportunity in terms of preparation, connections, and capital.

Students from affluent backgrounds have long had access to rich community-connected learning experiences and college credit opportunities. But in lower-income areas, only a small percentage of Kansas City students have historically been able to benefit from hands-on learning experiences that inform and equip their plans for after high school and expand their opportunities and social networks. Real World Learning experiences benefit all students, but not all students have access to RWL opportunities.

**“What employers are looking for are people who add value, and we value skills. A degree is supposed to be representative of skills. If somebody can bring us skills, without the degree, we should be indifferent.”**

*– Mike Stradinger, Holland 1916*

Students are not getting what they need to be ready for life after high school, and students and employers don't have time to wait. Recognizing the need to get serious about where the economy is heading and the future of education, Real World Learning ignited a sense of urgency around creating authentic learning experiences for students.

Through community conversations and data analysis, local programs including CAPS, **Summit Technology Academy**, and **LEAD Innovation**

**Studio** surfaced as examples that propelled students to and through postsecondary experiences into high-wage employment. This analysis led to questions: Who has access to valuable work-based learning? Who has access to entrepreneurial experiences? Who has access to college credit opportunities?

Real World Learning is an equity initiative aiming to provide all students with valuable experiences that lead to meaningful employment. Crafting community agreements around valuable experiences mobilized business partners and civic organizations as well as schools. It led to a reduction of barriers to participation and in many schools is making RWL embedded and supported experiences for all, not just some learners.

The collaboration between states to commit to the Real World Learning Initiative is unlike any other in the country. Regardless of the role played, districts collaborated to determine why they needed change, who they were changing for, and how that change would be mobilized to benefit students. Looking at data and drilling down to all subgroups, districts identified inequitable practices and highlighted opportunities for improvement. Recognizing that innovation wasn't happening throughout all levels of school systems, schools applied an equity lens to identify which students were not having rewarding experiences and to develop solutions that would reduce students' barriers to opportunities.

The mission of RWL is to ensure that by 2030, all high school graduates in the six-county KC metro area graduate from high school with at least one MVA. Business and industry leaders collaborated with districts and community partners to define three core objectives to guide the work:

- 1. Have an informed and engaged region:** Provide information, tools, and opportunities for families to help students navigate the career and educational paths available after high school.
- 2. Provide RWL opportunities at scale:** By having common agreements in place, ensure all students earn at least one regionally defined MVA in addition to a diploma by 2030.
- 3. Identify and advocate for local and state policies aligned with the RWL vision:** Work with local and state agencies to recognize the value of authentic learning experiences and advocate for requiring the completion of at least one MVA in addition to a high school diploma.

**“Being in the moment and getting coached in the moment, with real world situations, really helps ground what essential skill needs to be, and then you can coach to that.”**

*– Christine Ricci, uBreakiFix*

Change is difficult. Creating common agreements and developing frameworks is important, but it also requires community collaboration and policy changes. Districts like **Piper School District** in Kansas City, KS, focus on thinking outside the box and employing great leaders to make change happen. Piper used the RWL opportunity to engage parents and students around a Portrait of a Graduate Process, which became a powerful launching point. They aligned their strategic plan and had their board involved in the process.

When enacting change, aligning to the strategic plan is also a viable strategy. Capitalizing on the built-in sections around parent and student engagement serves as a launching point for community conversations. By revisiting the vision for students

and how that vision is connected to the betterment of the community, people are drawn into creating a different learning experience. Consistently communicating and interacting with parents, community partners, and students provides invaluable feedback that can influence how school practices need to shift.

Voice and choice are at the heart of the Real World Learning Initiative. At

#### **Guadalupe Centers High**

**School**, giving students a say in what opportunities they receive has helped them move closer to their goals. Allowing students to dive into experiences and see what they like and what they don't helped this school craft their academy structure with built-in access to MVAs before graduation. The recipe of embracing the community, listening, and figuring out where kids' passions lie makes authentic connections possible.

**Crossroads Charter Schools** is also ensuring that all voices are heard across their communities as they make the case for change to build out their vision. Focused on giving all students critical points of exposure, Real World Learning work starts in the middle schools, allowing students to choose career-oriented classes and giving them a varied look into all industries. Through the career exploration classes, students gain essential skills that are transferable and allow them to be successful regardless of their chosen pathway. Creating a strong alignment between middle school and high school helps students narrow their focus and feel more prepared for MVA opportunities.

The Kauffman Foundation and the regional collaborative believe that in a Real World Learning community, learners are prepared for work, school, and life after high school graduation. By gaining immersive experiences across a multitude of interests, industries, and employers through real-world projects and

**“We can’t allow things to stop the journey. Having a shared leadership and vision and then letting people at the building level run and getting out of their way, and getting them the resources they need has been the key.”**

*— Jessica Dain, Piper School District*

## **Why Real World Learning?**

Employers are looking for skills and valuable experiences. Nearly two-thirds of all jobs require more than a high school diploma and proven skills to access available opportunities.

Recognizing the need for more skilled and diverse future employees and business owners in the Kansas City area, the Real World Learning Initiative is built on five guiding principles:

- **Build Demand:** Engage business and districts together to identify opportunities for collaboration in their backyard and support districts development of customized approaches to MVA attainment, fitting the needs of their community.
- **Reduce Barriers to Entry:** Welcome an opt-in strategy that elevates champions to bring in potential partners instead of excluding them.
- **Build Capacity:** Ensure that all stakeholders understand the work, the goals, and the needs by investing in technical assistance and clear communication.
- **Learn Quickly:** Make new learning a priority by developing learning cohorts (with shared agendas) and foster adoption of new approaches at an accelerated pace.
- **Align Funding with Expectations:** Increase the commitment to districts in accordance with meeting/exceeding accountability measures and impact on learning goals.

**“One of the things we did was spend a lot of money sending a lot of people on school visits. They viewed schools in Nashville, Clearwater, Florida, and different places. Nashville, for instance, was on the verge of being taken over by the State Department, they had to change. Clearwater was going to be taken over, they had to change. We saw that we wanted to see more of a benefit for our kids to be work ready. By the staff and the Board going to see that in action really sold it to them. We sent city officials, labor unions, everybody we could to see what was happening, and when they saw it and they heard stories from other staff members and other students of the successes. It sold us.”**

*— Andrew Underwood, Belton School District*

internships, learners gain the skills to navigate their future. Mutually, employers participate to help share and prepare today's students to become the talent of tomorrow. Without stakeholders like **KC Rising**, **PREP-KC**, and others, making the case for change would be less inclusive and more complex. The Kansas City region and Real World Learning Initiative thrive because the value is seen, everyone has a role to play, and there is a common goal of providing authentic and professional learning experiences for students.

**"There is a disconnect between what happens the day before high school graduation and the day after and what currency students have in the world outside of school. What do students have that plugs into future learning or future work or both? Very few students had access to something meaningful."**

*– Aaron North, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation*

Blue Valley Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS) is a preprofessional, next-generation careers program that started in 2008 during the height of the recession. Recognizing the need for some connection to the authentic world and the ability to maximize community investment, CAPS serves high school juniors and seniors in a half-day program that earns high school and college credit.

With the leadership of business partners, a unique school concept was born. At CAPS, there are industry partners who are teachers and teachers who are nurses, which allows for rapid prototyping, a CAPS-generated model to keep the curriculum fluid based on student and industry needs.

With entrepreneurship and exploration at its center, CAPS invites students to explore problems and work alongside industry professionals to create solutions that are then presented and evaluated in a real-world learning environment. Rooted in a project-based learning environment, students gain confidence and other essential skills that often lead them to create their own businesses.

View  
**STUDENTS  
SPEAK OUT  
ON RWL**



**"This is the type of work that's keeping students engaged, that's keeping them connected because it's authentic work from real people in the community."**

*– Donna McDaniel, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation*

# COMPONENTS OF REAL WORLD LEARNING

Made up of a mixture of urban, suburban, rural, public, and charter, the first cohort of approximately 60 schools in 15 districts received grants in the summer of 2019 to support a planning year and began implementing their plans in the 2020-21 school year. The goal is that before the end of 2030, every student will graduate with a diploma that prepares them for future work and learning, having accumulated one or more MVAs that employers and higher education value:

## Work Experiences

- **Internships:** Learners perform meaningful job tasks under the guidance of a qualified supervisor.
- **Client-Connected Projects:** Learners analyze and solve authentic problems, working in collaboration with other learners and industry professionals.

EXAMPLES

● **Liberty Public Schools**, located in a suburb of Kansas City, is focused on changing the narrative of public school education. Inspired by the concept of scaling on the edges and continuous "how might we" questions, the schools provide Liberty students with daily Real World Learning experiences. Students enrolled in the **sports marketing program** work directly with the local business community to execute authentic projects with mentorship from high-level leadership. Students obtain sponsorships, produce, and deliver content for 1,000 attendees at live high school sporting events, and they use industry tools and technology to gain professional experience.

● Located in the heart of downtown, **Kansas City Public Schools** transformed its career center with a \$1.5 million facelift to the culinary department in 2017. The transformation served as a catalyst for creating **Cardinal Cafe**, a student run and operated dining establishment serving breakfast and lunch to school staff, students, and visitors. One of the career center's most popular offerings, Cardinal Cafe provides opportunities for students to learn what it takes to operate all aspects of a business. Under the direction of their chefs, students execute authentic duties and work with outside vendors to stay up-to-date on business and culinary trends.

“Your students, if they’re going to do an internship, if they’re coming into a company, they need to focus on delivering value.”

— Mike Stradinger,  
Holland 1916

## Entrepreneurial Experiences

Students identify a compelling social or market problem and mobilize resources to research and solve it. Leveraging input and support from multiple stakeholders, students iteratively analyze, prototype, implement, reflect, and adapt potential solutions. Outputs of MVA-level entrepreneurial experiences include a market and stakeholder research summary, a business plan that includes an assessment of costs and benefits associated with development or operation of their solution, and feedback from relevant external stakeholders obtained through exhibition or Shark Tank style pitch opportunities.

EXAMPLES

● A Northeastern suburb of Kansas City, **Kearney School District** emphasizes hands-on learning and exploring at all levels through place-based learning. The **Future Farmers of America** program provides students with a passion for the science, business, and technology of agriculture to engage in entrepreneurial experiences. Students create **businesses**, and local entrepreneurs teach them the technical and essential skills needed to move their ideas from conception to reality.

“Your entrepreneurial experiences, your client connected projects, you can build English standards into every one of those and really make sure that every one of those MVAs incorporate really strong demonstrations of mastery in communication.”

— Tom Vander Ark,  
Getting Smart

● **Fort Osage School District**, located in Eastern Kansas City, uses innovative thinking to create new resources for students. By re-envisioning the **Entrepreneurial Studies (E-Studies)** program, an established program with a track record of success, the district purchased a local coffee shop located on five acres of land. The coffee shop acquisition will house the E-Studies program and will contain a student-led and operated coffee shop. Students will also manage a 5,000-square-foot building (located by the coffee shop) to rent as an event space. Various disciplines and student voices informed every level of the decision-making process, creating space for more student-led curriculum crossovers in broadcasting, computer science, and art.

## College Credit

High school learners earn nine or more hours of college-level credit, ideally representing a sequence of courses toward an industry-recognized degree or credential.

### EXAMPLES

- North of downtown Kansas City, **North Kansas City Schools (NKC Schools)** strive to be champions for all students. Committed to implementing a system-wide approach to Real World Learning, NKC Schools collaborated with ConnectED to develop career pathways that embed internships, industry credentials, and/or college credit courses. Students attending NKC Schools can participate in their part-time Early College Academy through a partnership with the **Metropolitan Community College - Maple Woods** campus. Available to all juniors and seniors meeting the program requirements, students can earn up to 12 hours of college credit while attending high school and make significant progress toward an Associate of Arts degree.
- Blending career and technical education with college credit, the **Kansas City Construction Career Academy (KCCCA)** is a free high school program for students meeting the program requirements. Using the same collaborative spirit seen throughout the Real World Learning Initiative, KCCCA comes from the partnership of the Kauffman Foundation, Metropolitan Community College, **JE Dunn Construction**, and NKC Schools. Participating students can earn their Associate of Applied Sciences degree in Building Maintenance and Construction while concurrently earning their high school diploma. Once the program is completed, students can immediately apply to work as an apprentice or transfer the college credit to a four-year college or university in Missouri.

## Industry-Recognized Credentials

Learners earn industry-recognized credentials (IRC) based on current lists published by state education departments, and employers review and validate these credentials for applicability and relevance. In September 2019, KC Rising conducted a survey for business leaders to look at the state-determined (Missouri and Kansas) IRCs for life sciences, finance and insurance, information and technology, advanced manufacturing, architecture and engineering, and supply chain logistics. Through the distribution of paper and online surveys, 105 business leaders responded and determined the top three credentials that are most relevant for a high school student to earn before graduation.

### Top Three Credentials by Sector for High School Students

| Life Sciences                | Finance & Industry                              | Information & Technology                       | Advanced Manufacturing   | Architecture & Engineering           | Supply Chain Logistics                                 |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Certified Nurse Aide         | Microsoft Office Suite Excel Certification      | C++ Certified Associate Programmer             | American Welding Society | Autodesk Professional Certification  | OSHA 10 HR General Safety                              |
| Emergency Medical Technician | Microsoft Office Suite Word Certification       | Cisco Certified Entry Level Network Technician | Machine Level 1          | Autodesk Certified User              | Auto Service Excellence Student Certification - Diesel |
| Electrocardiogram Technician | Microsoft Office Suite PowerPoint Certification | Adobe Digital Publishing Suite                 | Machine Tool Technology  | American Design Drafting Association |                                                        |

### EXAMPLE

- Olathe Public Schools**, located in Northeastern Kansas, is home to 30,000 students and 15 academies. Students as early as eighth grade choose a high school experience based on academy selection. Through academies and the district's career and technical center, students can earn multiple industry certifications before leaving high school. Defined by the **Kansas State Department of Education** and business leaders, industry-recognized credentials are built into each academy to provide access for all students. Working with **AASA** and their **Redefining Ready! Initiative** prompted a sense of urgency to realign the curriculum with what career readiness looks like for students.

Offering rigorous courses that result in industry-recognized credentials, **Summit Tech Academy (STA)**, located in Lee's Summit, MO, east of Kansas City, blends hands-on learning with classroom instruction. Open to 18 school districts in the Kansas City region, Summit Tech connects students to college and career programs based on their interests and aptitudes. Categorized as a shared-time center, Summit Tech Academy partners with and is co-located with the **Missouri Innovation Campus** which is operated by the **University of Central Missouri**. Students attending STA can choose between nine preprofessional strands, all with built-in industry-recognized credentials and college credit. STA provides opportunities for students to focus on a specific career path and the resources to explore that path through classroom instruction and practical application.

### **Employer Sees RWL as an Investment in Their Company's Future?**

When people ask Anita Newton why she spends so much time working with students, her answer is simple: you can't afford not to.

"There's 70 million Generation Z people living in America," said Newton. "Their habits, attitudes, how they consume media and the way they interact with brands is fundamentally different than millennials or any other generation."

As the Chief Innovation Officer for CommunityAmerica Credit Union (CACU), Newton is focused on creating products and services for young people. "RWL provides a critical opportunity to not only better understand an important demographic, but also strengthen our future workforce."

CACU has worked with a range of school districts - urban, rural, and suburban schools, and regularly hosts a 15-to-20-person summer internship program. When the pandemic hit, they knew that the summer of 2020 would be different, so they pivoted to host a large-scale virtual internship program.

The Innovation Lab initially planned to host 50 interns. When 500 high school and college students applied, they decided to expand the opportunity, and hired 357 students.

- CACU has also worked on smaller scale client-connected projects with high school students. During the 2021 spring semester CACU collaborated with students from Kansas City Public Schools to create a life skills seminar for teens. Students developed a series of webinars with community experts on topics like managing your money and how to have financial success after high school.

"If you're an employer and you want new employees to enter your workforce and be future leaders, you need to understand how they interact," Newton said. "(Working with students) is a great way to build that relationship earlier versus waiting 10 or 15 years down the road."

**"A few years back, we had one of our business partners, **Garmin**, come to us and say we have a desperate need for electronics technicians as we cannot fill the pipeline fast enough. We need to partner with you. So, we created an electronics technician program where we are training students. They leave our high schools with a minimum of 17 college credits and our partnership with **Johnson County Community College** allows us to be able to send the students one more additional year to achieve their Associate's Degree and go right to work at Garmin."**

*– Barb Gonzales, Olathe Public Schools*

View

5 WAYS LOCAL  
BUSINESSES  
ARE  
BENEFITTING  
FROM RWL



## GRANTMAKING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Kansas City metro school districts viewed the Real World Learning goals as timely and important and quickly adopted them into their strategies. The high-level framework was compelling but flexible enough for districts to incorporate Real World Learning experiences in their own way and time.

The initiative avoids the winner-takes-most outcome of prizes by supporting success for all participants through a highly collaborative network of support, including planning grants, technical assistance, professional learning experiences, and biweekly leadership convenings.

Districts were able to create change as a result of an equitable funding model. Districts received funding based on school financial need and volume of students. Each grant amount was determined with an equity scale. Participating school districts received grants of about \$115,000 to support planning, implementation, and mobilization. Many districts used the funds to hire business partnership coordinators to expand internship and client-connected project opportunities. The grants also allowed design teams across the region to visit some of the best Real World Learning schools in the country (physically in 2019 and then virtually in 2020).

Through the funding received, each participating district had access to support ranging from the initial kickoff call to share the current state of affairs, to more detailed work with the design teams. During each kickoff call, districts identified strengths, challenges and opportunities, and they communicated goals that would help all students attain at least one MVA by 2030. They also discussed detailed grant requirements, as well as what additional access to support and resources would help each district reach its goals.

As part of the grant support, partner organizations were made available to the grantees at no additional cost. Whether districts needed to brainstorm, develop new school concepts, align the Real World Learning Initiative to its strategic plan, or pilot technology platforms, the wraparound supports were easily accessible and personalized.

It takes the involvement of all levels of leadership for Real World Learning to succeed. In addition to the support provided to the design teams, strategy advice was also shared with the district superintendents on a monthly basis via webinars. To date, there have been over 25 webinars conducted with attendance ranging from 90 to 120 participants at each session. This included superintendents, district leaders, school administrators, teachers, community and industry leaders, and intermediaries. The webinars highlighted national best practice examples like **HopSkipDrive**, **NAF**, and **Uncharted Learning** and local examples like **HBCU Walking Billboard**, **STEM Connect KC**, and **LaborChart** for participants to jumpstart their thinking.

In response to the pandemic, webinar leaders adjusted the frequency of sessions and the content conveyed. The premise of attaining MVAs didn't change, but districts needed more information on how to pivot to providing access in an increasingly virtual environment. In addition, districts conducted biweekly meetings for superintendents to create a sharing space in which to work through pandemic challenges and to share timely information.

Superintendents and the design teams also came together for Real World Learning convenings throughout the year. Each convening acted as a celebration of progress and gave districts a chance to continue to teach and learn from each other. Districts were encouraged to bring school board members, postsecondary collaborators, and industry partners as part of their team to have informed conversations.

### Real World Learning Professional Development Topics

Following and complementing visits to more than 300 schools between 2017 and 2019, monthly online professional learning experiences took place during 2019 and 2020.

Targeting teachers and school leaders, these sessions addressed Real World Learning implementation challenges. Topics included:

- Addressing transportation challenges and getting credit for out of school learning
- Data for learning and tools for storytelling
- Earning core credit for MVAs
- Incorporating MVAs into k-8 learning
- Competency-based education
- Design thinking and client-connected projects
- Client-connected projects
- Entrepreneurial experiences
- Internships
- Planning for MVAs
- Adding artificial intelligence courses and content
- Adding competency-based education to Real World Learning pathways
- Designing a micro school, creating access to Real World Learning
- Transcribing Real World Learning: extended transcripts, badging, and microcredentialing
- College credit and industry-recognized credentials
- Social entrepreneurship
- What will be different post-pandemic: reopening and innovating

## Menu of RWL Support

- Workplace tours
- Career presentations
- Informational interviews
- Job shadows
- Education externships
- Professional development
- Hosted classrooms
- Curriculum support
- Industry taskforce
- Guest instruction
- Project review
- Career mentoring

Districts also received the opportunity to try new ways of measuring data and offering services to students. As part of the Real World Learning grants, districts gained one year of access to pilot **ImBlaze**, an internship management software, and **YouScience**, a gamified tool to help students discover their interests and strengths. **Shawnee Mission School District**, one of the many local districts that partnered with YouScience, used the tool for students in grades 7 through 12. Desiring a way to best understand the talents of students and convey those findings in a way that aligned with college and career readiness plans, districts adopted YouScience with the support of district staff and parent buy-in.

The business to education support provided by ImBlaze and YouScience was an important component of Real World Learning. Many districts emphasized the role that industry plays in education through the hiring of Business to Education Coordinators. The coordinators serve as liaisons between industry and the school districts to create plans that make business leaders feel integral to the educational process. By leveraging existing relationships and forming new partnerships, Business to Education Coordinators have increased engagement and launched new efforts, programs and opportunities for students.

## Building Essential Skills Through Real World Learning

Real World Learning prepares students for the current and future economies. While stakeholders' opinions vary on the best path to get there, all agree that education needs to change so that students feel equipped for the future of work.

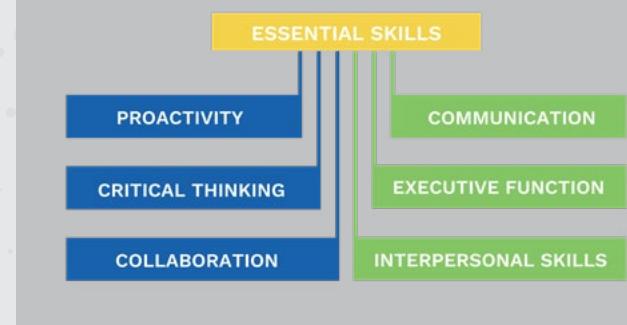
Through focus groups, conversations, research and surveys, the Kauffman Foundation, in conjunction with partners like the **DeBruce Foundation** and other entities, created an **Essential Skills Report** to provide guidance around the competencies and skills students need in the workforce.

Initiated as the **Common Sector Competencies**, 23 competencies became embedded in the curriculum by teachers in the Kansas City region. However, teachers still needed support in order to prioritize these competencies. In response to this need, industry leaders and educators collaborated to clarify six common priorities needed before graduation. Shared from the Essential Skills Report, they are:

1. **Communication:** The ability to adapt within various channels; to connect effectively with clients, coworkers, supervisors, and other collaborators
2. **Collaboration:** Cohesive teamwork that recognizes and leverages the skills and knowledge of colleagues across a range of disciplines
3. **Critical Thinking:** Problem-solving that synthesizes information, anticipates new challenges and opportunities, and builds strategies toward workplace effectiveness
4. **Interpersonal Skills:** Treating others with empathy and respect, building trusting relationships, and creating a sense of belonging and shared purpose
5. **Proactivity:** Taking the initiative to seek out and act on opportunities to learn, innovate, and add value to an organization
6. **Executive Function:** The self-accountability needed to work independently, manage tasks and resources to meet deadlines, and deal with ambiguity

With a common agreement on what students need and what employers are looking for, a framework of shared values across the Real World Learning Initiative streamlined how educators can prepare students for life after high school.

### What skills do Kansas City high school graduates need to be ready for the future?



# SUCCESS FACTORS

The structure of the Real World Learning framework allows school districts to determine what success looks like and how to reach the goal of all students earning at least one MVA by 2030. Using the "Tight-Loose Change Theory", outlined by author Peter Senge in "The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization," stakeholders articulated the gap between reality and the RWL vision, and they secured a collective goal and agreements on MVA definitions to close that gap. The MVAs served as the "tight" part of the theory, and district stakeholders determined how a district closed the gap between the current MVA percentage baseline and the collective vision (the "loose" part of the theory).

## Evaluating Real World Learning

The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation selected **MDRC**, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, to support Real World Learning in 2019. MDRC's relevant experience in evaluating education-to-workforce related initiatives, such as **CareerWise Colorado, YouthForce NOLA**, and New York City's WorkAdvance, their team's deep experience as education practitioners, and their willingness to work with hand in hand with local stakeholders to design the evaluation plan were all factors that made MDRC stand out.

In early 2020, MDRC created a Performance Management Framework (PMF) for districts participating in Real World Learning that shows the data collection needed to analyze and share as a region. The PMF is important because it reinforces the common language put forth in the Market Value Asset definitions, identifies indicators that are related to MVAs but may help improve implementation, gives districts a clear multi-year roadmap of the systems-level changes that are necessary to grow Real World Learning, and includes demographic data to maintain equity at the forefront. In the spirit of collaboration, MDRC shared the PMF during one-hour meetings with each Cohort 1 district prior to the Pilot Year and asked for honest feedback.

In late fall 2021, MDRC will share findings from the Pilot Year with districts, the RWL Executive Committee, the RWL CEO Champions Group, and Kauffman Foundation staff. MDRC will also pilot MVA surveys to capture qualitative feedback from students, teachers, and employers who are engaged in various Real World Learning experiences. In 2022 and 2023, the Kauffman Foundation plans to continue working with MDRC and to put greater emphasis on qualitative research, a regional learning agenda, and supports that make data submission easier for school districts.

## TIGHT-LOOSE FRAMEWORK

Regional stakeholders determined each aspect of Real World Learning. The program focused on outcomes and crafting regional agreements around determining MVAs. The goal is to ensure that every student leaves high school with one or more MVAs, and the "how" is left up to the districts.

## INVITATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Regional superintendents decided how districts were invited and which districts were invited. The assumption was that only a few would be interested, but by letting superintendents bring both each other and other stakeholders on board, the response garnered a large amount of support.

## REGIONAL AGREEMENTS FOCUSED ON EQUITY

Real World Learning used an equity lens in its design. The process began by conducting qualitative research, such as focus groups on parent and teacher perspectives. Students were also engaged in the development process of the work, and schools created student voice pilot groups of teachers who were learning and modeling how to implement more student-centered learning in their classrooms. Assessments of each district's differential need followed, and a system of professional development arose that was flexible enough to address a multitude of needs.

## EDUCATING STAKEHOLDERS

It is important to genuinely educate, inform, and engage all district stakeholders – students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and board members – early in the planning process to help guide the design process, gain buy-in, and provide a better understanding of the importance of Real World Learning. Bringing everyone together ensures that barriers are identified so all students can achieve MVA attainment.

## ENCOURAGING COLLABORATION

Superintendents are learning together and supporting each other as they provide the same opportunities for college and career readiness to all students. The collaborative effort not only helps students succeed, but provides an ecosystem for working through obstacles and advancing the regional educational and industry pipelines. Collaboration also formed between smaller neighboring districts (microregions) to help leverage resources.

Real World Learning focuses on ensuring its relevance for individuals, organizations, and communities across the Kansas City region. Although there are varied demographics of rural, urban, suburban, and many others, the collaboration has persisted. Regardless of the differences, Education Intermediaries and many others have worked to promote and expand the movement so that all students can access RWL experiences.

Education Intermediaries are collaborators focused specifically on providing services to districts, parents, and students. Many of them have specialized expertise, capacity, and flexibility to offer programming that meets a variety of needs. The just-in-time support and wraparound services are vital to the success of shifting teaching and learning.

## **STRONG SUPPORTS**

Changing education takes a village. The Real World Learning village consists of an executive committee made up of education leaders and more than 600 small and large employers across the region. It also partners with a CEO Champions Group that supports and champions Real World Learning and is composed of four sponsoring organizations: **Aligned, Civic Council of Greater Kansas City, Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce**, and the Kauffman Foundation. The committee raises business community awareness, reviews regional trends and outcomes, and advocates for needed policy changes.

## **POLICY SUPPORT**

The Kauffman Foundation garnered support from the Missouri and Kansas educational state commissioners to create regulatory changes. The collaboration with the state agencies informed the stakeholders and provided support for the work being done. Recruiting advocates and revamping policy helps integrate more Real World Learning across the system and region. By embedding accountability measures in all areas of the school system – budgeting, staffing, curriculum development, and student scheduling – more innovative and sustainable change can be made toward Real World Learning.

## **PLANNING GRANTS**

To help facilitate change, each participating Real World Learning district receives a planning grant. Districts use these grants to build design teams, inclusive of students and parents, and set goals for year one, the planning year. Years two and three are slated for implementation and progress toward the goals, with an expectation of built-in sustainability and scalability to reach the main RWL goal of all students receiving at least one MVA before 2030. To help support the grant, districts also fold in intermediaries and more business to education connections. All districts in the region that serve over 100,000 students are part of the conversation and will benefit from the framework.

## **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

The regional mobilization effort to change what the future of work looks like for Kansas City students required continuous professional learning. To help teams create a vision for what is possible in their own districts, stakeholders took school visits to see the innovative practices that exist across the country. Districts also received monthly webinars in which they heard from best practice sites both locally and nationally. Based on need, districts also engaged with outside partners to meet specific goals like building a Portrait of a Graduate, creating a microschool or infusing Real World Learning into the lower grades for increased and earlier career exposure. Local and national exemplar visits help districts see best practices in action and provide a new lens for innovation.

## **DATA AND EVALUATION**

The Real World Learning Initiative in Kansas City will achieve success when all learners earn at least one MVA by 2030. The development of a data infrastructure is underway to ensure districts can continue to learn from each other and grow together by comparing data. **MDRC**, an outside evaluator, has been assessing the initiative from its inception and will produce evaluative reports as resources for districts. What started as data sharing agreements with Cohort 1 has grown into all districts recognizing the need for a strong data infrastructure. Sharing the self-reported baseline data has helped districts understand that everyone has work to do to close the RWL gaps and that no one has it figured out yet.

## CHALLENGES

Real World Learning provides a structure that allows districts to reimagine core credit offerings. The MVAs allow students to demonstrate proficiency in essential skills such as writing, communication, problem-solving, and collaboration, as well as proficiency in core subjects such as science, math, social studies, and English language arts. Through regional and state support, districts can now offer more core credit options with:

- **Flexible teacher certification**
- **Flexible integration of standards into core credits**
- **Support from district administration**

High schools across the nation are the same. All regions can find success using Real World Learning if there is support for students from community, industry, and civic organizations. Districts can't do it alone, and it takes all employers to build a regional talent pipeline. To prove that the initiative is beneficial for regions, data must be collected and presented transparently to all stakeholders. There also must be a systemic change that reaches back to kindergarten to ensure a K-12 approach. Real World Learning makes the transition from high school to the world of work more streamlined and seamlessly ushers in an opening for students to create opportunities for themselves and make an impact in their communities.

Teachers play a pivotal role in re-creating the learning environment for students. Implementing RWL requires teachers to become facilitators of learning rather than just instructors, specifically relating to client-connected projects and internships. Setting teachers up for success with an internal team that includes external partners, such as business and industry leaders, is essential.

Reimagining the future of work does not come without its challenges. To ensure equity is embedded in providing quality Real World Learning experiences, removing barriers is important. Common barriers to providing authentic learning opportunities are:

- **Access to transportation for internships**
- **Ensuring employers stayed engaged**
- **Creating client-connected projects that are valuable for business**
- **Shifting learning experience control from teachers to students**
- **Removing funding barriers based on seat time**
- **Pivoting teacher development from teacher to facilitator**

Creating a framework that makes space for voice and choice, uses an equity lens, intentionally identifies challenges and gaps and celebrates success is the goal of Real World Learning. The aggregate result is likely to be that in a few years, nearly all local students will have more valuable high school experiences – and a few years after that, Kansas City will be an even more vibrant place to live, learn, and earn.

**“We are in a time where you’re putting multiple gigs together to sustain an income. Jobs may be multiple dimensions where young people are not only coding, but they are doing this, doing that, and then that is a whole pie of income that is sustainable for a family. Entrepreneurship can be started very early in a young person. Humans are entrepreneurial until we crunch it out of them in 3rd or 4th grade.”**

*– Donna McDaniel,  
Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation*

## RELATED INITIATIVES

There have been several related initiatives over the last 20 years that share some of the aims of the Real World Learning Initiative in Kansas City. Following are summaries of initiatives and school networks with similar objectives.

### REGIONAL INITIATIVES

**Children First:** This was a comprehensive reform plan developed in 2002 by Chancellor Joel Klein's team that included closing large failing high schools and replacing them with smaller, more personalized environments. The city opened more than 200 small nonselective high schools, largely concentrated in the Bronx and Brooklyn, resulting in improved student attendance, graduation rates and college performance. (Compared to RWL: much higher cost, biggest impact from new schools, less from existing schools.)

**Texas High School Project:** In 2003, Governor Rick Perry and the **Communities Foundation of Texas** launched the Texas High School Project (THSP) with support from the Gates, Dell, and Meadows Foundations. The initial goal was to develop 15 early college and 35 STEM high schools and to improve dozens more. Ten years later there were 135 new high schools serving 63,000 predominantly minority and low-income students – and today there are more than twice that number. THSP may be the most productive public private partnership in modern American education. (Compared to RWL: much higher cost, most benefits limited to new schools.)

**College Readiness Initiative:** In 2006, **College Spark Washington** invested nearly \$10 million in 39 low-income Washington State high schools to improve guidance and support. Ten years later, a **case study** showed dramatic improvement in graduation and college enrollment rates. (Compared to RWL: about double the investment per school for strong but narrower outcomes.)

**California Linked Learning District Initiative:** Launched with support from **The James Irvine Foundation** in nine California school districts in 2008, this five-year demonstration project included comprehensive high school redesign around career academies with rigorous academics, work-based learning, and strong supports. Irving invested over \$100 million in **Linked Learning**, including launching two national nonprofits, Linked Learning, and **ConnectED**, to scale the work nationally. California invested more than \$2 billion to advance this approach in dozens of districts. **Linked Learning districts** showed higher achievement, stronger college enrollment, and improved work readiness especially for students who were underperforming as they entered high school. (Compared to RWL: similar aims, larger investment per school for more consistent outcomes.)

### NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL NETWORKS

**NAF:** a network of 619 career academies featuring five career pathways and internship opportunities. (Like RWL schools, NAF students conduct internships.)

**New Tech Network:** about 200 schools commit to integrated team teaching and project-based learning. (Like RWL schools, most NTN students complete community-connected projects.)

**EL Education:** more than 150 schools committed to project-based learning. (Like RWL schools, most EL students complete community-connected projects.)

**XQ Schools:** Launched in 2015, the XQ Super School Challenge used the potential of big grants to mobilize more than 10,000 people in 50 states to form teams for proposing new or transformed schools around the **XQ Design Principles** and **Learner Goals**. About 20 grantee schools collaborated in a community of practice. (RWL community agreements and planning grants created a bit of the prize mobilization achieved by the XQ Super School Challenge).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CHANGEMAKERS

While most grants are given to support previously defined solutions, **pull mechanisms**, and prizes create incentives to develop new solutions for achieving a defined goal. Pull mechanisms activate widespread resources to solve problems more quickly and less expensively than traditional approaches.

The Real World Learning Initiative is a hybrid framework combining the mobilization of pull mechanisms with the direct support of grantmaking. The compelling, well-defined goals have been specific enough to enlist business and civic support. Because they focus on experiences – internships, client projects, and entrepreneurial experiences – partners knew how and where they could provide support.

The hybrid framework added planning and implementation grants and technical assistance to the community agreements. These support both increased participation rates and the quality of implementation.

The combination of regional agreements around a compelling framework and grants and support for participating systems have resulted in outsize mobilization, making Real World Learning super-efficient from a philanthropic perspective.

The Real World Learning Initiative activates **network effects**: the benefit of participation for all stakeholders grows with scale. As more students participate, the level of preparedness benefits regional employers. As more employers and postsecondary institutions recognize the program, the more experiences they offer to students.

The initiative has also been unusually collaborative. School districts and networks in six counties across state lines have worked together productively. The initiative was built on strong relationships developed by the regional support organization, such as **PREP-KC**. Support from community stakeholders and business partners has been essential to the success as well. The trust, respect, and flexibility shown by Kauffman Foundation staff and respected former superintendents enlisted to provide technical assistance have also been instrumental in maintaining the high level of collaboration even in crisis conditions.

There are five key elements of the Real World Learning Initiative that could be used in other regions, either in a similar high school transformation initiative or more broadly in human development from early learning to adult education:

- 1. Community agreements on valuable experiences: goal definitions specific enough to drive quality in a framework flexible for schools to adopt in their own way**
- 2. Planning grants that support priority mobilization efforts**
- 3. Technical assistance that promotes peer learning across leadership networks**
- 4. Professional learning experiences that support quality implementation at scale**
- 5. Data infrastructure including support for core applications and outcome evaluation**

While it's been four years in development, the Real World Learning Initiative is just beginning to benefit high school graduates in the greater Kansas City region. The infrastructure and momentum built so far suggest that these high schools will never be the same and, as a result, neither will the youth and economy.

## THE FUTURE OF REAL WORLD LEARNING

Making real world learning widely available to more learners in Kansas City and beyond is primarily a matter of leadership – making it a priority, building partnerships, creating time in the schedule, encouraging integration, and supporting teacher professional learning. That said, there are innovations that will benefit scale. Along with reduced policy barriers, there are four categories of tools and practices that can help extend access and quality: learner experience tools, guidance systems, capturing and communicating learning, and pathway opportunities.

## LEARNER EXPERIENCE TOOLS

Video conferencing software supported remote work for many companies during the pandemic, and some of them offered virtual internships for high school and college students. Virtual internships could expand the number of students who have access to quality work experiences, especially rural learners.

The use of internship management applications, including **Imblaze** and **Transeo**, will continue to make it easier for high school learners to find and secure work experiences and for teachers to monitor and document internships.

Virtual conferencing is also aiding client-connected projects. Applications like **Nepris** and **Educurious** make connections with experts who inform projects and serve as role models.

Most learning platforms are still based on cohorts consuming course-based content. Real World Learning, particularly client-connected projects, are co-authored experiences. Next-generation platforms will support authoring, managing, and assessing projects and publishing products.

Job training in retail, manufacturing, and healthcare increasingly uses virtual and augmented reality. Immersive simulations facilitate military and flight training. As costs come down and applications improve, there will be more use of these tools in K-12 for career education and skill-building.

## GUIDANCE SYSTEMS

Real World Learning creates opportunities for youth to audition possible futures. Applications like **YouScience** help learners identify aptitudes and interests. Resources like **World of Work** and **Roadtrip Nation** support immersive career experiences that can inform how students select high school pathways, internships and client projects.

Secondary school advisory systems (where an advisor meets with a small cohort of 15 to 20 students, 3 to 5 times weekly) are often used to build culture; monitor academic and social development; and support goal-setting, course-taking, and postsecondary planning. Advisory systems are where learners may have the opportunity to build a high school and beyond plan that incorporates Real World Learning experiences – particularly those that take planning, like college credit courses and client-connected projects.

Advice on pathway and postsecondary plans will increasingly include personalized and localized guidance. The **San Diego Workforce Partnership** provides students and working adults with zip code specific advice tailored to their strengths and interests.

## CAPTURING AND COMMUNICATING LEARNING

As industry moves to skills-based hiring, many employers are getting more sophisticated about defining the skills required for job success (and, conversely, less reliant on degrees as skill proxies). This shift to a skills focus is often accompanied by skill demonstrations that result in digital credentials.

Experiences, like internships and client projects, likely to build and demonstrate multiple skills can also be credentialed where they are well-defined. After completing 120 hours of internships and required coursework, learners in the 619 **NAF** career academies can earn a **NAFTrack** diploma, which is recognized by partner corporations for hiring preference.

In regions focused on Real World Learning, credentialed skills and experiences will flow to a **comprehensive learner record**: a secure, portable, learner/guardian-managed record of demonstrated achievement. Summaries of these digital records will appear in mastery transcripts (which may also include a list of courses passed) and in profiles shared on sites like **LinkedIn**. In Dallas, high school learners share digital profiles with employers, postsecondary institutions, and scholarship organizations.

Digital records will include (or be accompanied by) a portfolio of personal bests – artifacts that back up skill assertions in the learning record and help learners tell their story.

## PATHWAY OPPORTUNITIES

**ConnectED** is a national nonprofit that helps schools create career-themed Real World Learning pathways, including internships, client projects, and college credit opportunities. Five high schools in **North Kansas City Schools** worked with ConnectEd to implement Real World Learning pathways. **Belton High** worked with **Ford NGL** to develop a phased plan for implementing career-themed Real World Learning pathways.

The technology giants, including Amazon, Microsoft, Google, and Salesforce, have all created learning pathways resulting in certification. These asynchronous learning experiences are available for free inside and outside of school for learners in high school and beyond. These and other free (or debt-free) skill sprints and bootcamps can lead to high-wage employment and can supplement or replace traditional high school and postsecondary pathways.

## POLICY BARRIERS

While technology tools are promising aids to Real World Learning, the biggest opportunities are decisions by school and system leaders to prioritize authentic community-connected learning in scheduling, staffing, and budgeting. And all of these practice decisions will be enhanced by reduced policy barriers, including less restrictive seat time requirements, more flexible staff certification requirements, and state testing and accountability provisions that recognize the benefits of Real World Learning.



## APPENDIX

### PARTICIPATING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

| <b>COHORT 1</b>                  | <b>COHORT 2</b>              | <b>COHORT 3</b>               |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Belton School District           | Blue Springs School District | Desoto School District        |
| Center School District           | Blue Valley School District  | Harrisonville School District |
| DeLaSalle Education Center       | Park Hill School District    | KCK Public School District    |
| Fort Osage School District       | Piper School District        | KIPP Endeavor Academy         |
| Grandview School District        | Raytown School District      | Platte County                 |
| Hickman Mills School District    | Crossroads Charter Schools   | Smithville School District    |
| Hogan Prep Academy               | Guadalupe Centers            | Spring Hill School District   |
| Independence School District     | University Academy           |                               |
| Kansas City Public Schools       |                              |                               |
| Kearney School District          |                              |                               |
| Lee's Summit School District     |                              |                               |
| Liberty Public Schools           |                              |                               |
| North Kansas City Schools        |                              |                               |
| Olathe School District           |                              |                               |
| Raymore-Peculiar School District |                              |                               |
| Shawnee Mission School District  |                              |                               |

### RWL COLLABORATORS

| <b>Education<br/>Intermediaries</b> | <b>Civic<br/>Collaborators</b> |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| KC Scholars                         | AlignEd                        |
| KC Social Innovation Center         | KCADC                          |
| KC STEM Alliance                    | KC Chamber                     |
| The Learning Collaborative          | KC Civic Council               |
| Northland CAPS                      | KC Rising                      |
| PREP-KC                             | KC Common Good                 |
| Startland                           | KC Global Design               |
| Young Entrepreneur Program KC       | MARC                           |