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NEXUS

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Reimagining Workforce Readiness: A Coalition's Vision for Youth Entrepreneurship



Recent reports reveal a concerning trend: 60% of employers have terminated recent college graduates, particularly Gen-Z workers, this year.¹ Employers cited a lack of motivation, organization, communication, and professionalism as key reasons, indicating that many young professionals are unprepared for the workforce. This has led to growing hesitation among employers when it comes to hiring recent graduates, raising questions about how well we are preparing young people for their careers. The reality is that this issue isn't isolated. It points to a broader, systemic problem: our current approaches to education and workforce development are not adequately equipping the next generation for success. To create meaningful change, we need a dramatic shift in how we prepare youth for the future of work.

Recognizing this urgent need, a coalition of forward-thinking education organizations—including the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), BUILD.org, NAF, Virtual Enterprises International, and CAPS Network—joined forces in their advocacy efforts over the past year. United by a shared mission, they aim to reframe the conversation around workforce readiness by championing entrepreneurship education as a powerful solution. These organizations believe in the strength of working collectively to promote entrepreneurship education as more than teaching business skills—it fosters critical thinking, builds social capital, encourages career exploration, and provides hands-on, real-world experiences. By introducing these concepts as early as middle school, students gain a head start in developing the competencies they'll need to thrive in any career path.



Staff from different entrepreneurship education organizations (NFTE, NAF, BUILD.org, and Virtual Enterprises International) meet with policymakers in Washington, D.C.

As a collective, this coalition focuses on expanding student access to entrepreneurship opportunities, sharing impactful success stories, and offering policy recommendations to scale these programs nationwide. Its goal is to reshape education so that every young person gains the skills, confidence, and mindset needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving workforce. Achieving this vision requires collaboration from educators, policymakers, and business leaders to ensure that these opportunities reach all students.

¹ Royle, Orianna Rosa (2024). Bosses are firing Gen Z grads just months after hiring them—here's what they say needs to change. <https://fortune.com/2024/09/26/bosses-firing-gen-z-grads-months-after-hiring/> (accessed on 10/01/24)

About NFTE

The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) is a global education nonprofit that empowers partners to integrate entrepreneurial education across curricula and equips youth in under-resourced communities with the skills, connections, credentials, and real-world experiences needed to lead change and own their futures. Since 1987, NFTE has reached more than a million learners worldwide.

Fostering an Entrepreneurial Mindset Through Experiential Education

Atul Kapoor's journey into entrepreneurship began at the Academy of Finance & Enterprise in Queens, NY. His high school years were marked by unique opportunities, thanks to partnerships with various educational organizations. The school operated as a wall-to-wall NAF academy, ensuring Atul was always enrolled in at least one NAF class each semester. He took a semester-long NFTE course where he and two peers built a business from the ground up, giving him a firsthand look at what it takes to launch a company. He also spent two semesters with Virtual Enterprises International, where the class ran like an actual business, complete with departments, tasks, and responsibilities. Through these programs, along with job-shadowing experiences with Junior Achievement, Atul gained exposure to different aspects of entrepreneurship, whether it involved starting his own business or applying entrepreneurial skills within a larger organization. Together, these experiences allowed Atul to explore and test his ideas in a practical setting. During high school, he experimented with creating a variety of businesses, including a software app designed to store application details for different processes, a sanitation company, a software development firm, and an auditing service.



Atul Kapoor



Atul Kapoor (second from left) speaks on a panel about entrepreneurship education at the JFF Horizons conference in Washington, D.C. in July 2024 along with Lisa Dughi, CEO of NAF (left), Jose Garcia, Education Policy Advisor, United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions & Majority Staff, Senator Bernie Sanders (second from right), and Philip Fitzgerald, Senior Program Officer, Citi Foundation (right.)

After gaining experience in finance and software development roles at large companies, Atul took the leap and launched his own software company around six years ago. Since then, he has continued to diversify his ventures, including opening a juice shop. Reflecting on this, Atul admits he knew little about the juice and açai industry before he started but learned about 60% of the business upfront, picking up the rest on the job. For Atul, entrepreneurship has been about exploring opportunities and learning to navigate challenges. It has shaped his life and career, and he is passionate about helping the next generation access the same opportunities. He remains actively involved in initiatives like the NYC advisory board for NAF, ensuring that alumni stay engaged and continue to inspire the next wave of young entrepreneurs.

Initially, Atul envisioned a more traditional career path in software development or finance. However, the hands-on experiences with entrepreneurship in school led him to shift his focus. He realized that businesses are more than just numbers; they are dynamic communities where

innovation and problem-solving thrive. “Everyone might not be innately an entrepreneur, but everyone has the capacity to be,” he said. “It scratches an itch—sometimes it’s about creating, sometimes it’s about solving problems, but it’s always about making something your own.” Atul’s journey as an alumnus of multiple entrepreneurship programs shows how a combination of experiences can help support a student’s growth. This blend of experiential learning allowed him to build skills, test ideas, and explore possibilities—all through the lens of entrepreneurship.

Among the education organizations in this advocacy coalition—NFTE, BUILD, NAF, VE Enterprises International, and CAPS Network—each places a strong emphasis on student career readiness, but they approach it in unique

and complementary ways. A shared focus across their programs is the belief that youth entrepreneurship is a critical component of preparing students for future careers, equipping them with skills that are valuable across industries. “Entrepreneurship education is essential to any real effort to equip young people with workforce development skills, as small businesses are the backbone of American society,” said J.D. LaRock, President & CEO of NFTE. “It also allows students to explore their interests and apply skills in real-world scenarios, preparing them for long-term success.” Each organization brings its own perspective to teaching entrepreneurship, as illustrated by Atul’s story, which showcases the diversity of approaches and experiences within the coalition. These varied methods provide students with exposure to different industries, business ideas, and challenges, allowing them to explore a range of career pathways and develop a broad skill set.

At the heart of each coalition member’s work is the development of an entrepreneurial mindset, which NFTE defines as a set of characteristics, skills, and behaviors that empower students to take risks, seize opportunities, and navigate a wide range of settings and challenges. This mindset teaches young people to view failure not as a setback, but as a valuable learning experience—building resilience and fostering a growth-oriented perspective that can lead to greater confidence and long-term success. Regardless of the career path a young person chooses, these skills are essential. Whether they pursue a role in business, technology, healthcare, or the arts, the ability to think critically, adapt quickly, and innovate will set them apart, enabling them to thrive in an ever-evolving world.

Entrepreneurship and maintaining an entrepreneurial mindset are essential to increasing access and equity for young people, providing them with the tools to build a better future. Learning by doing allows young people to develop skills and gain real-world experiences they might not otherwise have, preparing them to navigate a variety of challenges and opportunities. “Not many adults in the workforce know how to make it a better place and feel energized by work, and entrepreneurship education is a huge motivator for students,” said Corey Mohn, CEO of CAPS Network. “It also creates economic opportunity for young people; if you live in rural Nebraska or South Dakota and want to stay in your community and thrive, entrepreneurship is your answer.” The impact of entrepreneurship education is evident in alumni outcomes. Studies from NFTE, CAPS Network, and NAF show that their alumni are graduating from high school at higher rates than the national average and are more satisfied with their education and careers. Additionally, they earn more than their peers, demonstrating that the skills gained through entrepreneurship programs translate directly to economic empowerment. By fostering an entrepreneurial mindset, these programs help break down barriers, opening new pathways for success regardless of a student’s background or location.

What Young People Are Saying

We reached out to Project Waypoint, American Student Assistance’s online teen community, and heard back from 152 teens nationwide in September 2024. Most respondents (112 or 74%) are in grades 11 and 12, and the remaining are in grades 9 and 10. Additionally, most respondents identify as female (68%). Here is what they shared:

When asked: “What does ‘thinking like an entrepreneur’ (being entrepreneurial) mean to you?”

- Almost one third mentioned being [creative and innovative](#), having original ideas and thinking outside the box.
- One quarter mentioned [owning your own business](#), being a boss, being independent and working for yourself.
- One quarter mentioned [making money](#), making profits, being business and finance savvy.
- Some other mentions were taking risks, having leadership qualities, being a hard worker, open minded, future thinking, being charming and persuasive.

Some quotes they shared include:

“I feel like being entrepreneurial is all about making your dreams a reality. I love music, and I’ve decided to make it into something more— I’ve gotten paid to play. It’s an amazing feeling doing something that you would’ve done for free and instead getting paid for it.”

“An entrepreneurial mindset is the essence of the American dream. New endeavors, endless possibilities, great risks, and great rewards are in the cards. However, you have to be able to take rejection and failure. You need passion, dedication, knowledge, social skills, problem solving skills, time, and luck to pull through.”

Building Social Capital Through Early Exposure to Finance

Shannon D. Smith's journey through NAF at Martin Luther King Jr. Senior High School in Detroit, MI illustrates the transformative impact of early exposure to professional skills and networks. Through the Academy of Finance, Shannon spent the first three hours of each school day immersed in subjects like accounting, taxes, and the stock market, building a strong foundation in finance. This early experience not only gave him technical skills but also instilled confidence and a clear vision for his future career. He credits the NAF program for sparking a lasting interest in finance, which set him on a path to pursue a double major in economics and political science at the University of Michigan.



Shannon D. Smith

Throughout college and into his professional life, Shannon continued to leverage the skills and connections he developed through NAF. An early mentor from the Academy of Finance, a VP at the Federal Reserve, reached out to Shannon during college to offer him an analyst role—an opportunity that proved pivotal in shaping his career. After four years at the Federal Reserve, he transitioned to community development work at JP Morgan, moved into private credit investing, and now works as a Department of Defense contractor focused on mergers and acquisitions. Across these roles, the skills he honed through NAF—such as quantitative analysis, business writing, and networking—have been essential. Shannon notes that of the four positions he has held, only one came without a prior connection, emphasizing the importance of building strong professional networks early on.

Shannon's story underscores how entrepreneurship education can shift the trajectory for young people, particularly those from underrepresented communities. "In a city like Detroit, where less than 20% of the population holds a college degree and unemployment rates are consistently double the national average, programs like NAF offer vital exposure to career paths that might otherwise seem inaccessible," he explains. Through internships and mentorship, students learn not only the technical aspects of business but also gain the confidence to ask questions, build connections, and see themselves in professional roles. For Shannon, a junior year internship at the Detroit Water Department helped him prepare for corporate life, while experiences like a visit to PricewaterhouseCoopers enabled him to make informed career decisions. The foundation laid by NAF was not only practical but motivational, giving him the tools to create a personal blueprint for success—one that began with a trip to New York City during his senior year and ultimately led to living and working there, a dream that became a reality thanks to early exposure and ongoing support.



Shannon D. Smith (left) during his trip to New York City with NAF during his senior year of high school.

Strategies and Recommendations from the Entrepreneurship Coalition

Over the past year, the entrepreneurship education coalition has united to advance entrepreneurship education through a range of strategic efforts. These initiatives have included increasing exposure and thought leadership, engaging in conversations with policymakers, and developing written advocacy recommendations. By presenting a unified front, the coalition's member organizations—each with strong outcomes and extensive networks—can collectively push the needle forward in promoting entrepreneurship as a critical component of education.

Here are some of the key recommendations and strategies the coalition has implemented to drive this work:

Increase access and exposure to entrepreneurship programs

As Atul's story showcases, increased access to a variety of entrepreneurship education programs can create robust, meaningful experiences for young people. His journey demonstrates that having access to various



J.D. LaRock from NFTE (far left) and Thais Rezende from BUILD.org (second from right) speak on a panel at SXSW EDU in March 2024 with Julie Lammers from American Student Assistance (right) and Daquan Oliver from WeThrive (second from left).



Corey Mohn from CAPS Network (left) and J.D. LaRock from NFTE (second from left) speak on a panel at the Getting Smart New Pathways to Real-World Learning conference in September 2024 with (from middle to right) Christy Scott from UnCharted Learning, Erica Hart from Kearney School District, and Amanda Riley from Basehor-Linwood School District.

types of entrepreneurship programs can significantly impact students' perspectives on their futures. Programs like NFTE, NAF, and VE Enterprises International should be available in more schools, offering students diverse avenues for engagement. As Atul notes, "Not every program is for everyone, but if you can get at least two into every school, it opens up possibilities. When a student can say, 'I was CEO of my own company,' it profoundly changes how they envision their future." To effectively increase access to entrepreneurship programs, it is crucial to build stronger partnerships with school districts, community-based organizations, and other like-minded entities. Collaborating with these partners can enhance the reach and impact of entrepreneurship education. Additionally, securing funding opportunities is essential for expanding these partnerships and increasing their effectiveness. Each organization involved in the coalition has established a solid base of corporate partners, funders, and individual donors. Large funders such as American Student Assistance, the Mott Foundation, and Citi Foundation, who invest in multiple entrepreneurship organizations, can significantly improve collaboration efforts among programs.

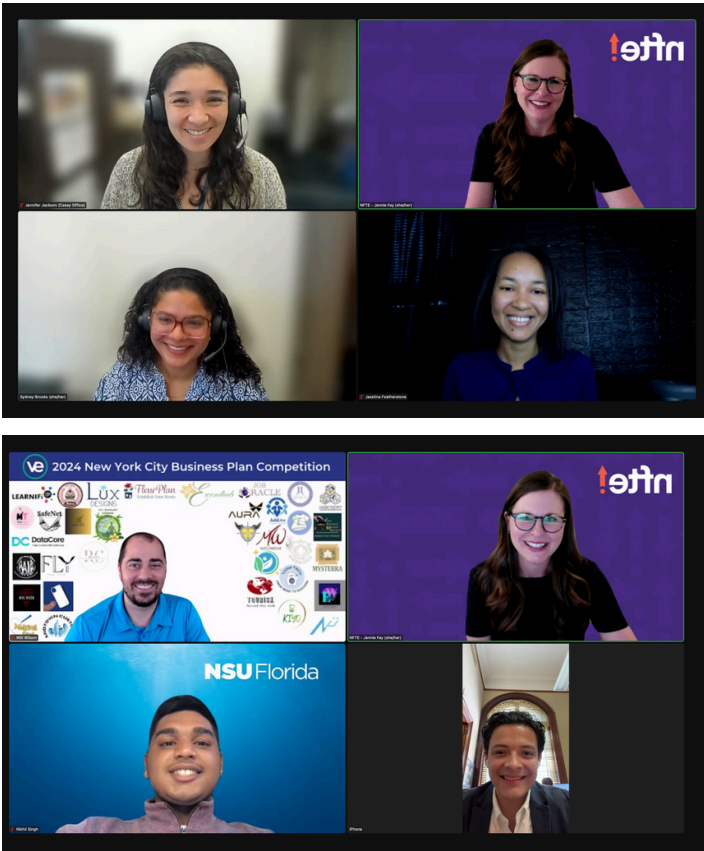
Sharing best practices has been a priority for the coalition over the past year. Collectively, these organizations have presented their work at prominent conferences, including SXSW EDU, the Getting Smart New Pathways to Real-World Learning Conference, ASU+GSV, and JFF Horizons. By reaching out to more schools, thought leaders, policymakers, and organizations, they aim to amplify their impact and promote the importance of entrepreneurship education. This collaborative approach not only enhances the effectiveness of individual programs but also fosters a more extensive network of support for young entrepreneurs.

Adopt a Community-Centric Model for Entrepreneurship Education

Entrepreneurship education goes beyond merely providing students with the opportunity to create their own businesses; it also emphasizes the importance of connections with professionals and community members. These relationships are vital for exposing students to various careers, understanding societal challenges, and building social capital. By interacting with experienced professionals, students gain insights into real-world challenges and develop the skills necessary to navigate them. Additionally, these connections can open doors to internships, mentorships, and networking opportunities, further enriching the educational experience and preparing students for future success in their chosen fields.

Each organization in the coalition engages the community in different ways to enhance the entrepreneurship education experience. NFTE, for instance, boasts a robust volunteer network of professionals who serve as mentors and judges for student competitions, providing invaluable guidance and support. Similarly, Virtual Enterprises International enlists professionals to act as judges during competitions and curriculum reviewers, ensuring that the programs remain relevant and impactful. BUILD also incorporates professionals into its framework by involving them as coaches. Before the school closures due to COVID-19, CAPS Network invited local entrepreneurs to work on their campuses in Kansas City, fostering organic connections with students. This practice not only created a more vibrant learning environment but also allowed students to gain firsthand knowledge about entrepreneurship. Now, CAPS Network is exploring how to implement this initiative again.

All coalition organizations also cultivate extensive networks of program alumni who share their experiences and support current students. Each organization provides resources and connections for the teachers implementing their curricula, helping to ensure that educators have the tools they need to succeed. These best practices are disseminated in various ways, including through an Advocacy Ambassador program launched this year. This initiative involves a group of students, alumni, staff, and teachers who intentionally meet with state and federal lawmakers to share their experiences and advocate for prioritizing entrepreneurship education in policy decisions. In addition to the Advocacy Ambassador work, each organization encourages its network of teachers to get involved in sharing effective practices. “So often the amazing work of our educators and students is not widely known beyond the walls of the school,” said Camille L. Currie, Vice President of Marketing & Communications at NAF. “By showcasing the work and inviting the business community and policymakers to hear about the innovative solutions and approaches students have developed through entrepreneurship education, you instantly highlight not only the success of this educational experience but also its importance in adequately preparing the future workforce for careers in any industry.” This collaborative effort underscores the value of community involvement in fostering a culture of entrepreneurship education that benefits both students and society at large.



Coalition member staff, alumni, and students met with staff from the offices of Senator Bob Casey Jr. (D-PA) (top) and Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) (bottom).

Advocate for Policies Supporting Entrepreneurship Education

The primary goal of the entrepreneurship education coalition is to drive systemic change by advocating for federal, state, and local policies that prioritize entrepreneurship education. This year, staff members from various coalition organizations engaged in discussions with federal and state policymakers to address key legislative initiatives, including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Reauthorization and the Perkins Act. In conversations with policymakers, we also promote policies that integrate entrepreneurship education into financial literacy, career exploration, and workforce development initiatives. These advocacy efforts are crucial, as they aim to ensure that entrepreneurship education is recognized as an essential component of a well-rounded education, equipping students with the skills they need to thrive in a rapidly changing economy.

To further its advocacy, the coalition has written letters to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce and the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee regarding the WIOA Reauthorization. Additionally, members of Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Virginia Foxx’s teams participated in panels at the JFF Horizons conference in July 2024, where they discussed various policy initiatives related to entrepreneurship education. Through these efforts, the coalition seeks to influence decision-makers and promote policies that support not only entrepreneurship education but also broader economic opportunities for students. The coalition envisions a future where entrepreneurship education is embedded in all educational curricula, providing students with the knowledge and skills to innovate and contribute meaningfully to their communities and the economy.

Advocating for Youth Entrepreneurship: Lessons from Green Haven Subscriptions

Anthony Kosofsky, a student at Lindon High School in Michigan, began his entrepreneurial journey with the creation of Green Haven Subscriptions, a business inspired by his upbringing on a tree farm and his passion for plants. His venture took root during a NFTE course, where he had the opportunity to develop his business idea. Anthony participated in the Genesee County Youth Entrepreneurship program, where he pitched Green Haven and earned second place, securing \$1,500 for his presentation and an additional \$300 from a booth setup. This success allowed him to establish an LLC, and he currently sells plants at a local farmer’s market.



Anthony Kosofsky



Anthony poses with other competitors at NFTE’s National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge in New York City in October 2024.

Anthony’s achievements in the local competition led to an invitation to NFTE’s National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge in New York City in October 2024, where he competed against students from across the country. His NFTE experience, combined with roles as CEO and COO of two classroom businesses through Virtual Enterprise International courses, has solidified his interest in entrepreneurship. Recognizing the value of these programs, Anthony has also joined the coalition’s Advocacy Ambassadors program to share his experiences with Michigan policymakers. Reflecting on his journey, he said, “As I’ve met and worked with adult small business owners in my community, I’ve heard them say that they wish they had these experiences earlier on in their education. More students should have the opportunity to explore and create businesses on what they care about.”

Green Haven Subscriptions continues to grow, with Anthony working on a beta phase for an app to expand online sales, which will then support his in-person transactions at farmer’s markets three times a week. He has set up a greenhouse in his backyard and dedicated a room in his home to his business. As a 16-year-old senior, Anthony plans to take a 13th year to earn an associate degree before pursuing a bachelor’s degree in business with a minor in botany, and potentially attending law school. Influenced by his father and uncle, both of whom are business owners, he aims to deepen his understanding of business operations and management while carving out his own path as an entrepreneur.

Conclusion

Our approach to preparing young people for the workforce is at a critical juncture, and the urgency for change has never been clearer. It's evident that our current educational systems are struggling to equip students for the realities of today's job market. Transformational change is only possible when different stakeholders join forces. As a coalition, this group of entrepreneurship organizations is working together to enact greater change, through increased access to programs and recommendations for policies.

To realize the coalition's vision, it is crucial for educators, policymakers, and community leaders to collaborate and commit to expanding access to entrepreneurship education. This includes establishing partnerships with local businesses, increasing funding for programs, and actively advocating for policies that integrate entrepreneurship into broader educational frameworks. The coalition's success relies on a united front that amplifies the voices of students, alumni, and educators to ensure that entrepreneurship education becomes a priority in our schools. By doing so, we can equip all young people—regardless of their background or geographic location—with the tools and opportunities necessary to thrive in the workforce of tomorrow.

About the Organizations Involved in the Coalition

Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE)



Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) ignites the entrepreneurial mindset with unique learning experiences that empower students to own their futures. A global nonprofit founded in 1987, NFTE provides high-quality entrepreneurship education to middle school, high school, and postsecondary students in 30 U.S. states and 31 countries. NFTE brings the power of entrepreneurship to students regardless of family income, community resources, special needs, gender identity, race, or ethnicity. NFTE has educated more than 1.25 million students, delivering programs in school, out of school, in person, online, and through hybrid models. Visit nfte.com to learn more.

BUILD.org

Founded in 1999, BUILD.org is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to use entrepreneurship to ignite the potential of youth from under-resourced communities to build Career success, Entrepreneurial Mindsets, and Opportunity. BUILD utilizes entrepreneurship education to elevate youth and propel them to academic and career success, while empowering them to become the CEO of their own lives. Last year, BUILD trained nearly 500 educators in over 100 cities across America and served over 8,000+ youth through BUILD's digital challenges and in-school entrepreneurship programming. For more information, visit www.BUILD.org.



NAF

NAF is a national education non-profit that brings schools and businesses together to better prepare students of all backgrounds. Since 1980, NAF has led a movement for immersive, career-focused teaching and work-based learning. With the support of NAF community-based advisory boards, schools connect with the workforce to fuel shared progress—from creating culturally responsive curriculum and paid internship opportunities, to fostering innovation and building future-ready businesses.

NAF has grown from one NAF Academy of Finance in New York City to hundreds of academies across the country focusing on growing industries including finance, hospitality & tourism, information technology, engineering, and health sciences; and support programs of study that are aligned with the National Career Clusters Framework. During the 2022-23 school year, over 112,000 students attended over 600 NAF academies across 35 states and territories. In 2022, NAF academies reported 99% of seniors graduated with 88% of graduates planning to go to college. www.naf.org



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Virtual Enterprises International



Virtual Enterprises International (VE) is a national educational nonprofit that transforms students through authentic business experiences into business savvy young professionals with an entrepreneurial mindset, preparing them for fulfilling, financially secure futures. Since Virtual Enterprises' (VE) inception in 1996, it has served

over 200,000 high school students, including many from underserved communities. Building on the success of the high school program, VE introduced the VE-JV Career Academy in 2015, a two-year middle school program that enables students to develop technology and entrepreneurial skills by starting and managing business ventures. We currently support 20,000 students annually across the U.S. each year and are part of a global network spanning 40 countries and over 7,000 student-run businesses. Learn more about VE on our [website](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [LinkedIn](#) pages.

CAPS Network



CAPS Network is a pioneering organization dedicated to transforming high school education by bridging the gap between the classroom and the professional world. Through innovative programs and partnerships, CAPS Network empowers students with real-world experiences that prepare them for successful careers.

CAPS structurally empowers high school students — primarily juniors and seniors-- to fast forward into their future with full immersion into the professional culture, solving real world problems, using industry standard tools and are mentored by actual employers. The model integrates high school, college and industry into a single community to provide a set of authentic

experiences. Today over 180 school districts participate in the network across 25 states and four countries. For more information on CAPS Network please visit: <https://yourcapsnetwork.org>.

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