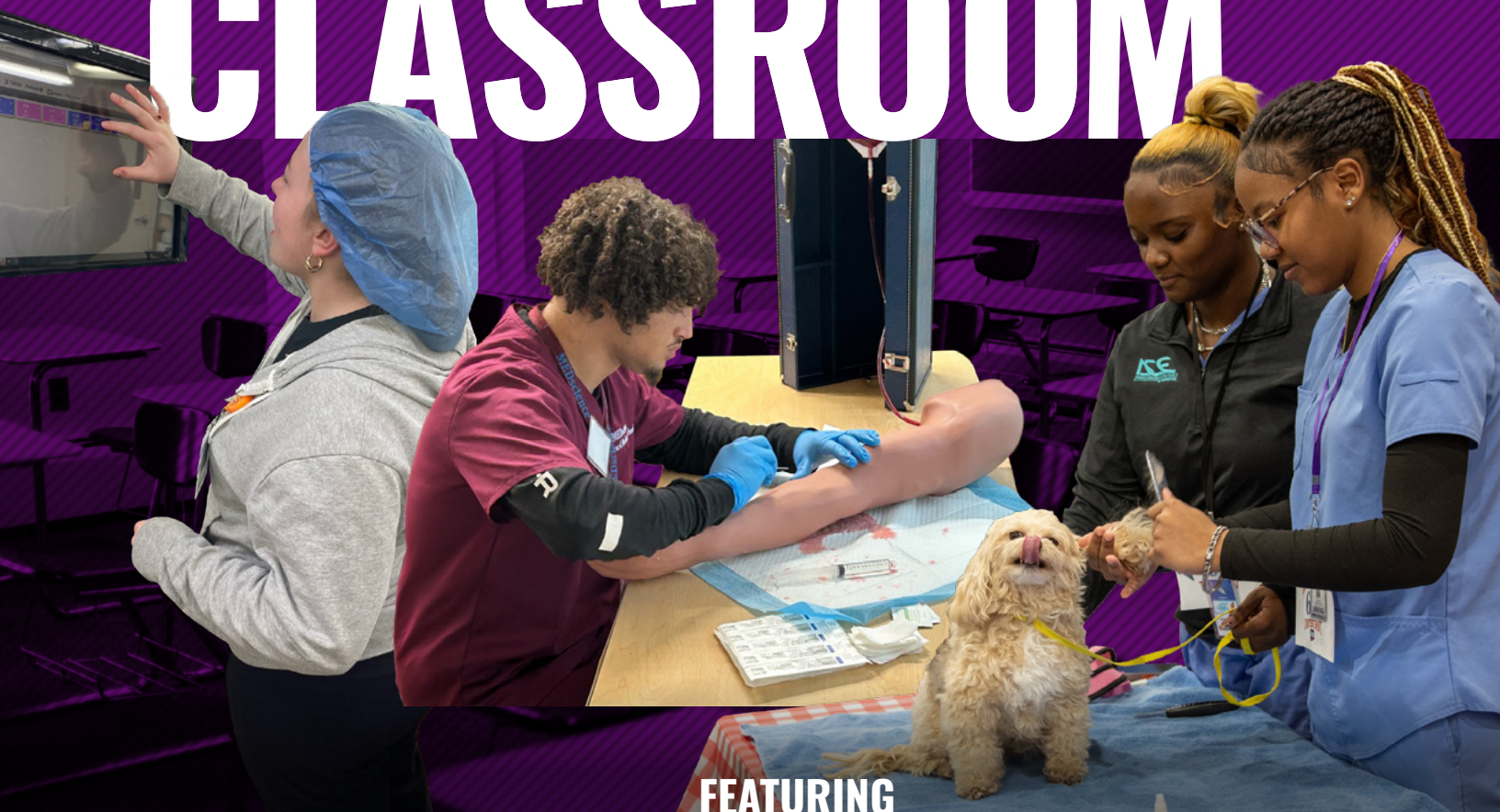


# LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM



## FEATURING

Eastern Hancock Schools, IN

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Henrico County Public Schools, VA

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Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, MA



## Learning Beyond the Classroom

How Systems Are Making Real-World Learning in High School the Rule, Not the Exception

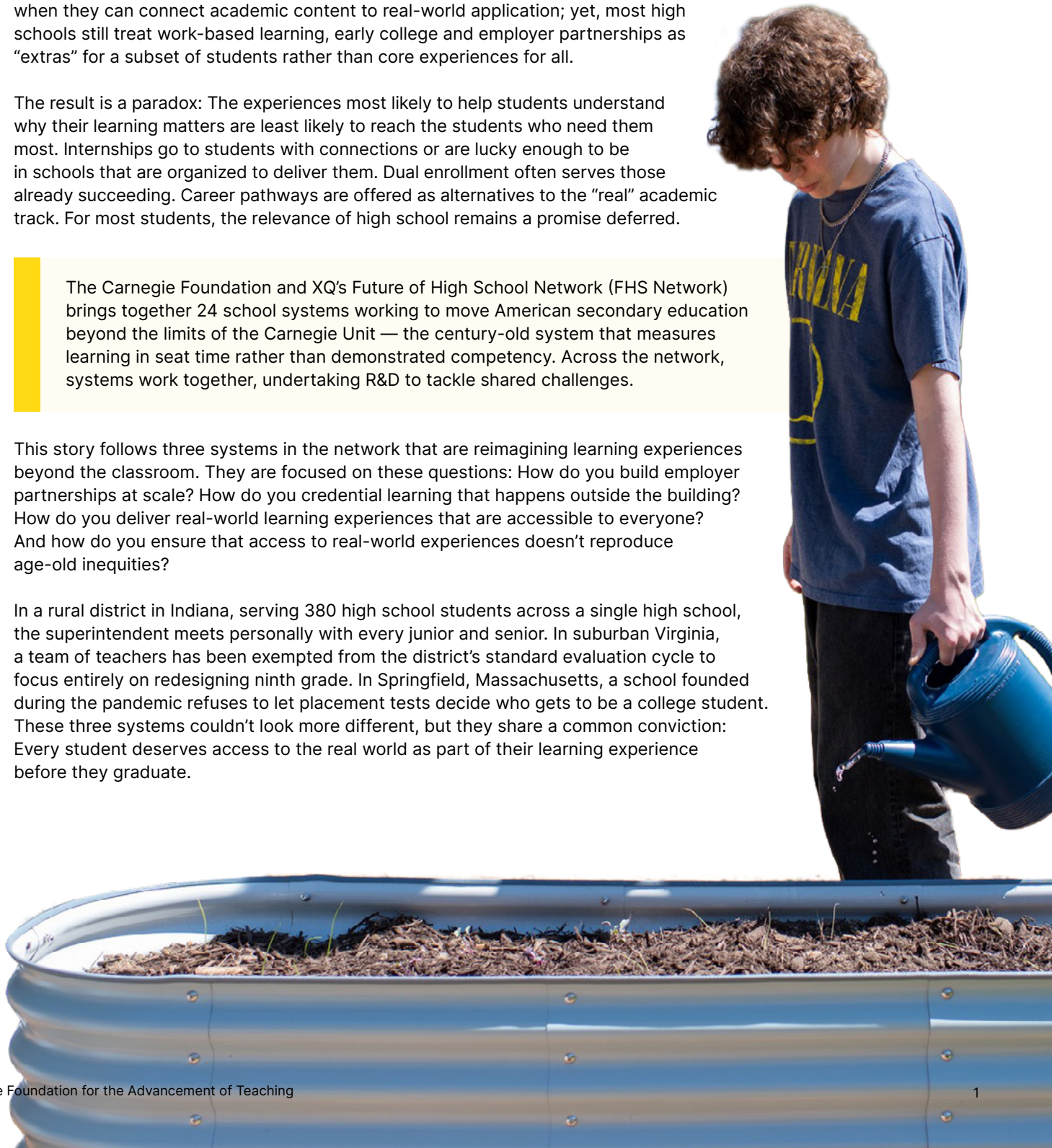
For more than a century, American high schools have operated on a simple bargain: Show up, accumulate credits and we'll certify you as ready for what comes next. But ready for what? And according to whom? A growing body of evidence suggests that students learn more deeply when they can connect academic content to real-world application; yet, most high schools still treat work-based learning, early college and employer partnerships as “extras” for a subset of students rather than core experiences for all.

The result is a paradox: The experiences most likely to help students understand why their learning matters are least likely to reach the students who need them most. Internships go to students with connections or are lucky enough to be in schools that are organized to deliver them. Dual enrollment often serves those already succeeding. Career pathways are offered as alternatives to the “real” academic track. For most students, the relevance of high school remains a promise deferred.

The Carnegie Foundation and XQ's Future of High School Network (FHS Network) brings together 24 school systems working to move American secondary education beyond the limits of the Carnegie Unit — the century-old system that measures learning in seat time rather than demonstrated competency. Across the network, systems work together, undertaking R&D to tackle shared challenges.

This story follows three systems in the network that are reimagining learning experiences beyond the classroom. They are focused on these questions: How do you build employer partnerships at scale? How do you credential learning that happens outside the building? How do you deliver real-world learning experiences that are accessible to everyone? And how do you ensure that access to real-world experiences doesn't reproduce age-old inequities?

In a rural district in Indiana, serving 380 high school students across a single high school, the superintendent meets personally with every junior and senior. In suburban Virginia, a team of teachers has been exempted from the district's standard evaluation cycle to focus entirely on redesigning ninth grade. In Springfield, Massachusetts, a school founded during the pandemic refuses to let placement tests decide who gets to be a college student. These three systems couldn't look more different, but they share a common conviction: Every student deserves access to the real world as part of their learning experience before they graduate.



## Eastern Hancock, Indiana: **PUZZLE PIECES**

Eastern Hancock Schools covers the largest geographic area in Hancock County, Indiana, but has the smallest enrollment — about 380 high school students scattered across rural farmland 30 miles east of Indianapolis. In a district this size, there's no hiding in the averages.

So the district built an individualized, demand-driven matching system. Superintendent George Philhower and his principal meet individually with every junior and senior to catalog their post-graduation interests and aspirations. Quarterly CAFE (Community And Family Engagement) luncheons surface the other half of the equation: Local employers share workforce needs, identify positions that could become pathways and signal their willingness to host students, then Philhower and his team do the matching.

About one-third of juniors and seniors are now engaged in work-based learning and half of them are college-bound, challenging the persistent assumption that career-connected learning serves only students not headed to degree-granting institutions.

The district organizes its work around four commitments — joy, connection, growth and success — that prioritize student agency and relational trust alongside academic outcomes. Two employer partnerships illustrate how these commitments translate into practice. Midwest Mole, a regional construction company, developed “Mole U,” a training program designed specifically for high school students. The company now hires 10 to 12 Eastern Hancock graduates annually. At a recent “signing party” modeled on athletic signing ceremonies but for employment, an executive from Astemo, another employer partner, told a student: “It’ll be really cool when you’re 65 and you get to have one of these parties together, because you’re retiring together.”



George Philhower, Superintendent Eastern Hancock

**“The goal is for teachers to become verifiers of learning: credentialing it and sometimes causing it when it’s not happening on its own.”**



The structural innovation enabling this work is deceptively simple: a modified block schedule where students attend all classes on Monday, half on Tuesday and Thursday, and the other half on Wednesday and Friday. Students can work full days on either Tuesday/Thursday or Wednesday/Friday, or opt for half-days throughout the week — flexibility that allows the guidance department to design individualized plans for every student who wants one.

Philhower calls it a “permissionless environment”: the freedom to innovate within existing rules, without waiting for formal authorization. The deeper shift, he argues, is in how educators are beginning to understand their role. “The goal is for teachers to become verifiers of learning: credentialing it and sometimes causing it when it’s not happening on its own.” It’s a direction, not a destination — but one the district is actively working toward.

Henrico County, Virginia:

# EXCELLENCE FOR EVERYONE



Henrico County Public Schools, just outside Richmond, Virginia, serves more than 16,000 high school students across multiple campuses. Director of High School Education Thomas Ferrell, Jr. is candid about the district's challenge: "We have excellence in pockets." Advanced programs, engaged teachers, strong outcomes — but concentrated among students who already thrive in traditional structures. The question driving Henrico's transformation work is whether those pockets can become the norm.

Art Raymond, Principal of J.R. Tucker High School, argues that selectivity is the problem. When the most engaging experiences are reserved for students who opt in, the district is effectively rationing what should be universal.

To test that proposition, Henrico launched a ninth-grade teaming structure at three high schools, two of which are in the FHS Network. Four core teachers — Algebra 1, World History, Earth Science and English 9 — share a cohort of 88-100 freshmen. The team plans collaboratively, and designs cross-curricular projects that connect academic content to career exploration.

At Mills E. Godwin High School, where students are placed in cohorts for English, Math, World History, Environmental Science, Health and Physical Education and some Biology, the first project asked students to create career infographics based on self-assessments through a platform called Major Clarity. Construction management emerged as the top career interest. Under Principal Leigh Dunavant's leadership, teachers built on this interest rather than dismissing it as an outlier. This year, professionals from the nine career fields students identified will visit for targeted conversations — not a generic career day but a responsive follow-up to student-generated data.

The vision extends well beyond ninth grade. Henrico is taking freshmen to the regional technical center — access normally reserved for sophomores — and planning toward a future in which senior-year learning happens primarily outside the building, in work placements aligned to student pathways.

Henrico County Public Schools



**Sustained redesign requires protected space — much like marathon training requires a different kind of focus than maintaining a regular workout routine.**



This structure is possible because of a thoughtful, intentional adjustment that prioritizes teachers' time and attention during the work: participating teachers are not simultaneously engaged in the district's standard evaluation cycle. As Raymond explained, sustained redesign requires protected space — much like marathon training requires a different kind of focus than maintaining a regular workout routine. By easing competing accountability demands, this structure creates the conditions for teachers to fully engage in learning, collaboration and innovation.

The work is also surfacing new definitions of success. One student had a 45 average in the first quarter. By the second quarter, she was in the 60s, and while still far from the honor roll, there was evidence of transformed habits and mindset that traditional grading systems fail to capture. Raymond uses a restaurant analogy: "If you go to a restaurant and the service is bad, you don't blame yourself. You don't go back. But in school, we tell kids it's their fault." This model inverts that assumption, treating student disengagement as a signal about instructional design rather than a deficit in the learner.



### Discovery Polytech, Massachusetts:

## BUILDING ANTI-SYSTEMS

Discovery Polytech Early College High School didn't exist before the pandemic. It emerged from a question that educators in Springfield, Massachusetts, couldn't stop asking: What systems filter students out of college and high-wage careers, and what would it take to build around them?

The school, part of the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP), now serves 214 students in grades 9–12. Every student is a college student from day one, not because they qualified for a selective program, but because that's the design. There is no placement test. There is no readiness requirement. "They're in front of us. Brains work, and they're ready," says Kelley Gangi, who leads postsecondary partnership work for the Empowerment Zone.

Discovery students earn up to 60 college credits before graduation — not scattered general education courses, but credits mapped to specific degree pathways in high-wage, high-demand fields such as optics and photonics, nursing and advanced manufacturing. The average graduate leaves high school with 40 college credits. One student who graduated last year entered his bachelor's program as a second-semester sophomore.

School leaders are careful to distinguish their model from traditional dual enrollment. "Dual enrollment is typically for the students that have a minimum GPA or have completed most of their high school requirements," Gangi explains. "And it is often the highly resourced kids." Early college, as Discovery practices it, is universal: embedded in the regular school day, sequenced toward a credential and paired with work-based learning in the same career field.

When the school first attempted to place students in internships, regional employer interest was nonexistent. So the team adapted: They engaged with partners to curate career simulations and virtual workplace experiences with real employers, incorporated industry certifications and connected students to remote internships with start-up companies through a national nonprofit matching platform. If traditional pathways are closed, Discovery builds alternative routes.

Gangi calls this approach "building anti-systems." The team studies the mechanisms that filter students out — such as placement tests, readiness gates and advising structures that treat early college students as invisible — and then designs around them. Memoranda of understanding with college partners explicitly develop equitable practices and policies. A diversified portfolio of higher education partnerships ensures that if one relationship deteriorates, students don't pay the price.

Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

**“The most meaningful shift is more subtle: Students stop hoping to be chosen by colleges and employers, and begin to see themselves as the ones doing the choosing.”**



One of Discovery's most distinctive practices is its approach to chronic absenteeism. Rather than treating absence as a behavior problem requiring consequences, the school applies a diagnostic model: Absence is a symptom with underlying root causes. "When you go to the doctor with a persistent cough, the doctor doesn't prescribe, 'Stop coughing,'" Gangi explains. "But we do that to students all the time." Instead, as in a medical model, staff investigate root causes — such as anxiety, family obligations, transportation and health — and they develop correlating, individualized intervention plans. They then track whether the intervention is working, adjusting as needed.

The signals of transformation are sometimes unexpected. Students who once imagined summer jobs at amusement parks now pursue internships at cancer research centers and law firms. But staff say the most meaningful shift is more subtle: Students stop hoping to be chosen by colleges and employers, and begin to see themselves as the ones doing the choosing.

## The Common Thread

Rural Indiana, suburban Virginia, urban Massachusetts. Three hundred eighty students, 16,000 students, 214 students. A superintendent who meets with every junior personally, a district that exempts innovative teachers from evaluation, a school that negotiates placement tests out of existence.

It isn't a program or a curriculum that connects them. It's a conviction that students don't need to prove they're ready before they're allowed to access real-world experiences. Readiness, in these systems, isn't a gate. It's an outcome.

Each system has had to bend something that was never designed to bend, including schedules, evaluation systems, college agreements, employer expectations. They've discovered that the barriers to learning beyond the classroom aren't just logistical. They're ideological: deep assumptions about which students are "ready," which experiences are "academic" and whose job it is to prepare young people for the world.

Across these three systems, insights are emerging that may prove useful to the broader field. First, structural flexibility — modified schedules, evaluation exemptions, diversified partnerships — is a precondition for innovation, not a reward for it. Second, the language of "readiness" too often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, filtering out exactly the students who would benefit most from real-world learning. And third, the work requires building new roles: teachers as verifiers of learning, guidance counselors as matchmakers, administrators as negotiators with external systems that weren't designed with these students in mind.

In Eastern Hancock, a guidance department sees itself as an enabler, not a gatekeeper. In Henrico, a team of teachers is freed from evaluation so they can focus on reimagining what ninth grade could be. In Springfield, a school refuses to let its students be filtered out of the futures they deserve.

There's a phrase Philhower uses: "Guarantee means guarantee." It's not an opportunity for some students who meet certain criteria, it's an entitlement for all students who walk through the door.

As he put it: "When we were kids, if we asked our teacher, 'Why do I need to know this?' we got in trouble. Our kids are begging for that information now."

These three systems are answering that question.



**“These three systems couldn’t look more different, but they share a common conviction: Every student deserves access to the real world as part of their learning experience before they graduate.”**

## LEARN MORE



### Eastern Hancock Schools

Eastern Hancock is dedicated to providing more opportunities within our school and with our community partners to build confidence and success for every student as we guide them through EH towards their next step in college or a career. Our mission is to create an exceptional school experience where we continuously improve our ability to deliver on these 4 promises: Design Magical Moments, Prioritize People, Inspire Extraordinary Growth, and Focus on the Future.

Learn more at: <https://www.easternhancock.org>.



### Henrico County Public Schools

Henrico County Public Schools, through engagement with our families and community, equips students with the knowledge and skills to be ready for life and a successful future. Henrico County Public Schools is committed to creating an educational environment where every student has opportunities needed to reach their full potential. Whether in the classroom, on the field, in creative spaces or preparing for future careers, we ensure that learning experiences are engaging, meaningful and student-driven. By providing flexible learning paths, encouraging student input in decision-making and fostering a culture of exploration and innovation, we empower students to take ownership of their education and pursue their passions in ways that align with their goals and aspirations.

Learn more at: <https://www.henricoschools.us>.

## SEZP Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

A unique partnership between the Springfield Public Schools, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Springfield Education Association teachers union, SEZP serves nearly 5,000 students in 16 middle and high schools that it operates across the city. It was established in 2015 to accelerate equitable student outcomes at chronically underperforming schools in Springfield. Neither a charter school network, nor state takeover, nor in-district turnaround strategy, SEZP created its own innovative model that combines autonomy with support and accountability.

Learn more at: <https://www.sezp.org>.



### Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

The mission of the Carnegie Foundation is to catalyze transformational change in education so that every student has the opportunity to live a healthy, dignified and fulfilling life. Established by an act of Congress in 1906, the Foundation has a rich history of driving significant change in the education sector, including the creation of TIAA-CREF, the Education Testing Service (ETS), the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Pell Grants and the Carnegie Classifications for Higher Education. Today, the Foundation is dedicated to the transformation of the American high school and making the postsecondary sector a more vital engine for economic mobility.

Learn more at: [www.carnegiefoundation.org](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org).

