



# Catalyze Challenge



**A path for every student.  
A plan for every future.™**

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## **INAUGURAL CATALYZE CHALLENGE WINNERS TO TRANSFORM JOURNEY FROM CLASSROOM TO CAREER**

*Over \$4M in funding will fuel innovative solutions in career-connected learning across the US*

**SAN FRANCISCO, NOVEMBER 4, 2021** – In an effort to level the playing field for all students and catapult young people into meaningful careers, the [Catalyze Challenge](#), co-sponsored by American Student Assistance, Arnold Ventures, Charter School Growth Fund and the Walton Family Foundation has awarded over \$4M to accelerate bold career-connected learning solutions aimed at helping students better access economic opportunity after leaving school.

Fifteen winners — community organizations, entrepreneurs, and cross-sector partnerships from across the country — will pilot, launch and scale solutions designed for the leaders of tomorrow's workforce.

“Being a thriving, productive and joyful member of society means having the agency to meaningfully shape one's own future and the future of our communities. There's never been a more opportune moment to equip young people with the skills and mindsets to drive change for themselves and our country,” said Romy Drucker, Education Program Interim Director at the Walton Family Foundation.

Over recent decades, a lack of affordable higher education combined with limited career exploration, experiential and navigation opportunities have meant that many students don't have the tools to fulfill their career potential. Meanwhile, a skilled workforce shortage, changing labor market demands, and

increased employee desire for meaningful and sustainable career paths mean employers need alternatives to traditional hiring paths to keep up and maintain leadership in today's economy.

The Catalyze Challenge was created to meet this moment, with grants funding inventive ideas for career-connected learning at middle and high schools and programs supporting the transition to early college coursework.

All winners have an explicit focus on reaching historically underserved students, including students of color, those living in low-income and/or rural communities, and students who are the first in their families to go to college. Selected solution themes include:

- **Unlocking potential in the rural heartland:** Through school partnerships and innovative initiatives where students learn technical and soft skills, solutions aim to revitalize local economies and set young people up for life-long career success.
- **Encouraging the entrepreneurial spirit in young people:** From students of color getting work experience doing web development and social media marketing for mission-driven organizations to work-based learning programs with partners like the New York Department of Education, AT&T, and Cisco that enable young people to launch small businesses, the solutions offer real skills and real paychecks.
- **Digital credentialing for 21st century skills:** A unique pilot program for students to earn credentials in "soft skills" such as creative problem solving and critical thinking, making their proficiency visible to colleges and employers for the first time. The digital credentials and college credit for the learning and demonstration of soft skills do not yet exist and could be a gamechanger for young people.

"We're thrilled to support these bold ideas that integrate career education for all students. Building in career exploration and experimentation, as early as middle grades, as well as post-secondary education planning support, is a no-brainer when it comes to making sure every student has what they need to succeed," said Annabel Cellini, Chief Strategy Officer of American Student Assistance. "Everyone benefits when young people leave school ready to enter the workforce: students have the skills and knowledge to be successful in their careers, schools make progress against the metrics they care about, employers build stronger talent pipelines, and community economies become more resilient."

The complete list of winning organizations (bolded) and their solutions:

**Aecern** - At the Cutting Edge of Emerging Career Fields (Florida)

*Aecern's At the Cutting Edge program addresses urgent challenges by engaging students in grades 6 and up in emerging technologies and associated careers while working on solutions to authentic problems facing professionals in these fields.*

**BUILD** - BUILDing Generation Entrepreneur through Digital A (California)

*BUILD supports students from 8th through 12th grade across the nation in building businesses and confidence to be successful with those businesses through an entrepreneurship program that provides mentors and training to set students up for success.*

**Building 21** - Launchpad (Pennsylvania)

*Launchpad is a new initiative from Building 21 that will directly connect young people to living-wage paying jobs that offer upwardly mobile career opportunities while providing them with the credentials, skills, mindsets and experience to thrive in these roles.*

**CodeSpeak Labs** - The Next Step (California)

*The Next Step is a creative agency of BIPOC high school students from underserved communities in California and New York working with professional mentors from CodeSpeak Labs. The agency gives students real-world professional experience doing web development and social media marketing for mission-driven organizations.*

**Collegiate Academies** - Next Level NOLA: Bridging High School and Beyond (Louisiana)

*Collegiate Academies' Next Level NOLA initiative provides transformative, personalized support to graduating seniors in New Orleans that counters the obstacles students traditionally face in their postsecondary pursuits.*

**Collegiate EduNation** - Collegiate Edu-Nation Rural HOPE Project (Texas)

*Collegiate Edu-Nation is a Texas-based network that facilitates the transformation of rural student outcomes and rural workforce development by partnering with local school, community and business leaders to establish and support regionally relevant education systems.*

**Crowder College** - Digital Pathways in the Rural Heartland (Missouri)

*With their Digital Pathways in the Rural Heartland initiative, Crowder College and Codefi have partnered to reshape the narrative about career opportunities in rural America from one centered on manufacturing and agriculture to one that includes a flourishing digital workforce.*

**Cultivate** - Cultivate Pathways (Nationwide)

*Cultivate Pathways aims to reduce the gap in educational equity that exists for English language learners. This nationwide program provides paid work-based learning experiences to English learner students in grades 11th through college, delivering credentials that will lead to higher pay in one year.*

**Education Design Lab** - Propel Polk! Credentialing 21st Century Skills (Florida)

*Education Design Lab is making students more competitive applicants for colleges and employers by creating credentialed programs for soft skills.*

**Propel America** - Accelerate America (Louisiana)

*Propel America's Accelerate America initiative allows high school graduates to access affordable and quick pathways to a living-wage job and college credits in collaboration with AccelerateU at National Louis University.*

**nXu** - Career Exploration: Purpose & Identity Development (Nationwide)

*Through nXu's curriculum, students engage in career exploration through the lens of purpose and identity while cultivating their social and emotional learning skills - and in doing so, the curriculum encourages greater academic engagement, fosters a sense of belonging among students and instills confidence in students to navigate their professional and academic journeys.*

**Trio New College Network** - 3-D Learning: A New High School to Career Pathway (New Jersey)

*Trio New College Network, Gateway U Hybrid College and K-12 education partners LEAD Charter School & Great Oaks Legacy Charter School, have come together to create a model aiming to unify three currently disconnected "dimensions" of our current education system - K-12, higher education and workforce development in order to eliminate barriers to student success.*

**Hack the Hood** - Designing a High School to Tech Career Pathway

*Hack the Hood uplifts early career youth and communities of color through tech skill-building programs grounded in justice. They also provide career navigation support that ensures economic mobility.*

**The New Rural** - Just and Thriving Rural & Remote Futures (Arkansas)

*Seeing the trend of work-from-home opportunities increasing throughout the US, Rural Community Alliance's Just and Thriving Remote Futures Initiative hopes to bring remote work opportunities to students in rural communities throughout Arkansas.*

**WeThrive** - EducationWeThrive (Nationwide)

*WeThrive leverages a best-in-class curriculum and self-guided interactive modules to activate youth as change-makers who create real companies, earning real revenues as they perfect the practice required to achieve economic prosperity.*

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**About the Walton Family Foundation**

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses, work together to lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving K-12 education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. To learn more, visit [waltonfamilyfoundation.org](http://waltonfamilyfoundation.org) and follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

**About American Student Assistance® (ASA)**

American Student Assistance® (ASA) is a national nonprofit committed to helping students know themselves, know their options, and make informed decisions to achieve their education and career goals. ASA believes students should have access to career-connected learning, starting in middle school, so they can develop a plan for their future. ASA fulfills its mission by providing digital-first resources directly to students and support for educators and intermediaries. To learn more about ASA, visit [www.asa.org/about-us](http://www.asa.org/about-us).

**About Charter School Growth Fund (CSGF)**

Driven by a conviction that all children deserve great public schools in their communities, Charter School Growth Fund identifies the country's best public charter schools, funds their expansion, and helps to increase their impact. They provide funding and support to a community of school leaders who seek to grow and serve more students, whether they are expanding from one to two schools, or building a network of many schools.

**About Arnold Ventures**

Arnold Ventures is a philanthropy dedicated to tackling some of the most pressing problems in the United States - investing in sustainable change, building it from the ground up based on research, deep thinking, and a strong foundation of evidence. They drive public conversation, craft policy, and inspire action through education and advocacy.