



EXPLORE

BUILD

GROW



2026-27 Catalyst Funding

Request for Proposals · Expanded Learning Opportunities

Afterschool and summer programs as essential community infrastructure for Nebraska youth.

LITERACY

CAREER EXPLORATION

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



Beyond School Bells™

nebraskachildren

Applications are due Friday, August 7

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTORY LETTER	2
NEW FOR CATALYST FUNDING 2026-2027	3
GOALS AND FRAMEWORK	5
FUNDING REQUIREMENTS	8
CATALYST RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COHORT	10
HIGH SCHOOL STAFF SUPPORT INITIATIVE	11
LITERACY PATHWAY	12
FRAMEWORK	12
RUBRIC	16
WORKFORCE EXPLORATION PATHWAY	19
FRAMEWORK	19
RUBRIC	23
APPENDIX	26

A note from the Vice President of Beyond School Bells:

Through this year's Catalyst Funds, Beyond School Bells invites partner programs to make intentional contributions toward two critical statewide priorities: strengthening literacy and preparing young people for future success in postsecondary pathways and the workforce.

We know that afterschool and summer programs are uniquely positioned to advance these outcomes. Yet too often, Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELOs) are left out of conversations about educational improvement, workforce development, and community success.

The 2026–27 Catalyst Fund invites you to help change that narrative.

Our vision is that, in the years ahead, afterschool and summer programs will be recognized by school districts, employers, community leaders, and policymakers as **essential community infrastructure** for achieving literacy and workforce related goals and long-term success for NE youth. It is difficult to imagine a stronger path toward long-term sustainability for ELOs than becoming indispensable to the outcomes our state has prioritized.

Thank you for your interest in Catalyst Funding. We welcome applications that embrace this vision and bring creative, innovative approaches to helping young people build the literacy skills, career exploration experiences, and aspirations that prepare them for lifelong success.



Dr. Alison O'Toole
Vice President, Beyond School Bells

NEW FOR CATALYST FUNDING 2026-2027



Beyond School Bells (BSB), Nebraska’s statewide afterschool and summer learning network and a program of Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCCFF), is proud to reaffirm its mission to expand high-quality, sustainable Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELOs) for Nebraska youth through the 2026–27 Catalyst Fund.

More than a funding opportunity, Catalyst 2026-27 is an invitation to join a growing statewide movement focused on **improving literacy outcomes** and **expanding career possibilities** and long-term success for Nebraska youth through high-quality afterschool and summer learning.

STATEWIDE IMPACT PATHWAYS

For the 2026-27 school year, Catalyst Funding recipients will select **ONE** of two statewide impact pathways:

- 1. **Workforce Exploration Pathway:** Programs will provide career-connected learning experiences that help young people explore future opportunities, develop workplace and leadership skills, and build meaningful connections between education, postsecondary pathways, careers, and community.

OR

- 2. **Literacy Pathway:** Programs will use high quality literacy experiences to help young people strengthen reading skills, build a love of learning, increase engagement, and develop the foundational skills needed for lifelong success.

SUPPORTIVE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES



Deeper Funding Opportunity: Research & Innovation Cohort

A small number of communities will have the opportunity to participate in a new Research & Innovation Cohort designed to help Nebraska better understand how Expanded Learning Opportunities can accelerate literacy, workforce readiness, and long-term youth success. This option is a deeper implementation opportunity rather than a competing pathway. See page 10 for more information.

High School Staff Support: Postsecondary Development Initiative

Beyond School Bells believes that employment within afterschool programs can serve as a meaningful first step toward postsecondary education, career exploration, leadership development, and long-term success. High school staff are not just program support; they are young people building skills, leadership, and future pathways in real time.

As part of the 2026–27 Catalyst Funding Opportunity, programs requesting support for high school staff wages will participate in a statewide high school staff development initiative designed to help youth reflect on their experiences working in afterschool, strengthen future planning skills, and explore postsecondary and career pathways. See page 11 for more information.

FUNDING AMOUNTS

Programs may apply for either pathway Catalyst Funding (**up to \$25,000**) or consideration for the Research & Innovation Cohort (**up to \$45,000**). Research & Innovation Cohort (RIC) sites participate in additional coaching, evaluation, and statewide learning activities and receive up to three years of funding. The RIC option is included as the last item in the application documents.

CATAYST FUNDING ELIGIBILITY

The 2026-27 Catalyst Funding is available to Nebraska afterschool programs outside of the Lincoln and Omaha metro areas.

APPLICATION TIMELINE AND SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Key Dates

- Applications Open: June 15, 2026
- Informational Webinar: June 18, 2026 at 12:00 PM CT
- Application Deadline: August 7, 2026
- Award Notifications: August 14, 2026
- Funding Period: September 1, 2026 – May 31, 2027 (9-month grant period)

Additional funding opportunities may be available to support summer programming in 2027.

Applications must be submitted by **Friday, August 7, 2026**. Please email completed applications to Dakota Staggs at dstaggs@nebraskachildren.org and Ann O'Connor at aoconnor@nebraskachildren.org.

For questions regarding the application or funding opportunity, please contact any member of the Beyond School Bells team.

CATALYST FUNDING GOALS AND FRAMEWORK

Catalyst Funding goals reflect the core activities Beyond School Bells sees as essential to high-quality afterschool and summer programs.

GOAL #1 - QUALITY = Strengthening the Practice
Advance high-quality Expanded Learning Opportunities that use literacy or workforce exploration experiences to improve outcomes for youth.

This goal focuses on supporting programs to deliver meaningful results for youth through continuous improvement, evidence-informed practice, and intentional use of data. It is about quality, effectiveness, and impact.

BSB will provide funding, coaching, and technical assistance to help programs strengthen quality practices, use data to guide decision-making, and implement engaging literacy or workforce exploration experiences. Relative to the selected grant pathway, program partners will be supported to:

- a. Use frameworks such as NAQCIS, Whole Child, Whole Life, or other evidence-informed approaches to assess and strengthen program quality.
- b. Participate in site-based coaching, professional learning opportunities, and statewide learning communities focused on literacy or career-connected learning.
- c. Use youth, family, school, and community feedback to inform program design, continuous improvement efforts, and pathway implementation.
- d. Collect and use data relevant to the selected pathway to better understand how participation contributes to literacy growth, career awareness, engagement, belonging, and readiness for future success.
- e. Implement intentional practices that create safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments where youth can thrive.

GOAL #2 – SUSTAINABILITY = Building the System
Build the partnerships, resources, and community support needed to sustain literacy and workforce exploration opportunities over time and position ELOs as essential education and community infrastructure

This goal focuses on advancing ELOs as indispensable to achieving community goals. It is about integration, alignment with local and state priorities, and investment.

BSB will invest in strategies that help grantees strengthen long-term sustainability through partnership development, resource and programming alignment, district engagement, and integration with local education and workforce systems. Relative to the selected funding pathway, program partners will be supported to:

- a. Develop strategic partnerships with school districts, libraries, employers, postsecondary institutions, and community organizations that share responsibility for advancing literacy and workforce outcomes.
- b. Align ELO programming with local education, workforce, and community priorities so that afterschool and summer learning become valued contributors to broader community goals.
- c. Create opportunities for district leaders, employers, and community partners to invest in and co-design literacy and workforce exploration experiences.
- d. Build sustainable staffing, funding, and partnership models that increase local ownership and reduce reliance on any single funding source.
- e. Participate in coaching and planning activities that strengthen the long-term position of ELOs as critical community infrastructure supporting youth success.

GOAL #3 – LOCAL ADVOCACY and POLICY= Telling the story.

Increase awareness of the role Expanded Learning Opportunities play in strengthening literacy, workforce readiness, and community success.

This goal focuses on helping decision makers and community members understand the value of ELOs and act on that understanding, it is about communication, influence, and policy support.

BSB will provide resources and opportunities to help programs communicate their impact, engage stakeholders, and build support for policies and investments that expand access to high-quality ELOs. Relative to the selected grant pathway, program partners will be supported to:

- a. Share stories, data, and evidence that demonstrate how ELOs contribute to literacy development, career exploration, postsecondary preparation, workforce readiness, and youth success.
- b. Engage educators, employers, families, community leaders, and elected officials in understanding the value of ELOs and their role in achieving local and statewide priorities.
- c. Identify and elevate youth, families, employers, educators, and other local champions who can advocate for continued investment in ELOs.
- d. Participate in local, regional, and statewide conversations that inform policy, increase public support, and expand access to quality afterschool and summer learning opportunities, including at BSB’s Advocacy Day in early 2027.
- e. Use communication and storytelling strategies to demonstrate the impact of literacy and workforce exploration initiatives and elevate youth voice as an integral component.

GOAL #4 – INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMING= Reimagining the Experience

Implement engaging, youth-centered literacy or workforce exploration experiences that reflect local interests, build life skills, and prepare young people for future learning and work.

BSB will support the development and implementation of innovative experiences that connect literacy and workforce exploration to youth interests, community assets, and future opportunities. Relative to the selected grant pathway, program partners will be encouraged to:

- a. Implement innovative literacy or workforce exploration experiences that reflect local needs, youth interests, and community strengths.
- b. Create opportunities for youth to explore careers, develop leadership skills, engage in service learning, participate in work-based learning, or connect literacy to real-world applications.
- c. Center youth voice in program design, implementation, and evaluation.
- d. Pilot new approaches, partnerships, technologies, or learning experiences that expand opportunities for youth.
- e. Participate in shared learning opportunities to exchange ideas, test innovations, and showcase promising practices that strengthen youth engagement and future readiness.

FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

Programs receiving Catalyst Funding are joining a statewide learning community committed to advancing literacy and workforce exploration outcomes for Nebraska youth.

Funded programs will be expected to:

1. Participate in virtual Catalyst network meetings, professional development opportunities, and learning community activities throughout the grant period.
2. Maintain timely and responsive communication with the BSB team regarding implementation, reporting, and technical assistance needs.
3. Implement high-quality literacy or workforce exploration programming aligned with the selected Catalyst pathway.
4. Participate in statewide advocacy and awareness opportunities, including Advocacy Day hosted by BSB (anticipated late winter/early spring 2027).
5. Submit required expenditure and progress reports through designated reporting systems.
6. Collect and share data, stories, and examples that help demonstrate the impact of Catalyst-funded activities.
7. Engage in continuous improvement activities, including coaching, planning, and reflection opportunities aligned with selected goal areas.

Depending on the goal area(s) and activities proposed, **additional requirements** may apply.

Examples may include:

- Participation in individualized coaching or technical assistance.
- Development of annual quality improvement, sustainability, advocacy, or partnership plans.
- Participation in youth voice activities, including brainstorming sessions, advisory groups, or feedback processes.
- Collection of pathway-specific outcome data related to literacy, career exploration, postsecondary preparation, or youth engagement.
- Participation in the statewide high school staff development initiative for programs requesting high school staff wage support.

COMPETITIVE APPLICATION

Funding levels are responsive to each program's needs, strengths, and capacity for impact. Programs should build on their unique assets and community context to advance literacy or workforce exploration outcomes for youth while contributing to broader statewide priorities.

Competitive applications will demonstrate not only how they will serve youth, but also how they will strengthen the role of Expanded Learning Opportunities as partners in achieving broader community goals.

Examples include applications that:

- a. Demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement through the use of quality frameworks, coaching, data, and stakeholder feedback.
- b. Position Expanded Learning Opportunities as strategic partners in advancing local literacy, workforce, postsecondary, or community development goals.
- c. Build meaningful partnerships with schools, libraries, employers, postsecondary institutions, and other community stakeholders.
- d. Engage youth as active participants in shaping program experiences, priorities, and future directions.
- e. Communicate program impact through data, storytelling, youth voice, and community engagement efforts.
- f. Deliver innovative literacy or workforce exploration experiences that connect learning to real-world opportunities and future pathways.
- g. Demonstrate a willingness to participate actively in BSB's statewide learning community by sharing promising practices, learning from peers, and contributing to collective impact across Nebraska.
- h. Commit to ongoing, open, and timely communication with the BSB team to support a strong and responsive partnership.



RESEARCH & INNOVATION COHORT

A limited number of programs (approximately 3–4 statewide) will be selected to participate in the Catalyst Research & Innovation (R & I) Cohort.

These programs will help advance statewide understanding of how Expanded Learning Opportunities contribute to literacy, workforce readiness, postsecondary preparation, and long-term youth success.

Additional R&I Supports

Research & Innovation Cohort sites may receive:

1. **Up to three years of funding support** and **increased funding levels** based on context
2. Enhanced coaching and technical assistance
3. Access to national literacy and workforce development experts
4. Advanced professional learning opportunities
5. Participation in a statewide learning and improvement network
6. Opportunities to help inform future statewide policy and practice

Additional R&I Commitments

Selected sites will agree to:

- a. Implement evidence-informed programming within the Literacy or Workforce Exploration pathway
- b. Participate in a multi-year continuous improvement and research effort
- c. Engage in advanced coaching and professional learning activities
- d. Collect enhanced program and participant data
- e. Participate in evaluation activities including surveys, interviews, observations, and related data collection efforts
- f. Share lessons learned and emerging practices with the statewide network

Just as local programs help build community infrastructure, Research & Innovation Cohort sites help build the knowledge infrastructure needed to strengthen Expanded Learning Opportunities across Nebraska.

HIGH SCHOOL STAFF SUPPORT: POSTSECONDARY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE



As part of the 2026–27 Catalyst Funding Opportunity, programs requesting support for high school staff wages to facilitate career-connected STEM activities with younger youth will participate in a statewide high school staff development initiative designed to help youth reflect on their experiences working in afterschool, strengthen future planning skills, and explore postsecondary and career pathways.

Participation in this initiative will be provided at no cost to the program and will include coaching and support from statewide partners, minimizing the lift for Catalyst program partners.

Programs receiving high school staff wage support must:

1. Designate a staff member to serve as the local coordinator for participating high school staff. (This may be the Program Director or another staff member.) A coordination stipend will be provided.
2. Provide space and scheduling support for three to four training sessions throughout the program year. Training will be delivered on-site by trained partners, including Nebraska Extension and Connected Youth Initiative coaches, at no cost to the program.
3. Report the number of hours worked by each high school staff member during the program year.
4. Ensure participating high school staff complete a required survey designed to measure the impact of their employment and training experiences in the afterschool program.

Additional details and implementation guidance will be provided to funded programs.

LITERACY PATHWAY FRAMEWORK

Purpose

The Literacy Pathway helps young people fall in love with reading, build reading identity, access abundant and diverse books, and develop the foundational skills needed for lifelong success.

While Nebraska's long-term education goals include increasing third grade reading proficiency from approximately 59% to 75% by 2030, reading identity develops long before proficiency is measured. Expanded Learning Opportunities are uniquely positioned to help youth experience reading as joyful, explore books at their own pace, connect reading to their interests and families, and begin to see themselves as readers.

Through age-appropriate experiences, youth build reading enjoyment, develop reading identity, and grow the voluntary reading habits that research shows are among the most reliable paths to proficiency and long-term success.

Theory of Change

Young people who have abundant access to books they choose themselves experience reading as joyful and social, see trusted adults model enthusiasm for books, connect reading to their homes and families, read more, and reflect on their identity as readers. Reading volume builds the vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency that lead to proficiency and lifelong success.

Core Question: How do we help youth fall in love with reading and see themselves as readers?

Developmental Progression

Elementary School: Reading Joy & Discovery

At the elementary level, the focus is on helping youth discover the pleasure of books and begin building reading identity.

Youth may:

- a. Browse and choose freely from abundant, diverse books.
- b. Experience read-alouds, book talks, and shared reading as joyful social experiences.
- c. Take books home to build personal and family reading habits.
- d. Connect books to hands-on activities, play, and personal interests.
- e. Begin identifying favorite books, authors, genres, and topics.
- f. Examples may include cozy reading areas, bookstand browsing, read-alouds, book-themed clubs, literacy-connected art and STEM activities, take-home backpacks, family reading events, and reading celebrations.

Middle School: Reading Identity & Expansion

At the middle school level, the focus shifts to deepening reading identity and expanding what young people read and why.

Youth may:

- a. Explore a wider range of genres, formats, and authors, including graphic novels, nonfiction, and audiobooks.

- b. Participate in social reading experiences such as book clubs, peer recommendations, and book swaps.
- c. Connect reading to personal interests, identity, and community.
- d. Take on roles curating book selections and shaping the reading environment.
- e. Reflect on their reading lives, preferences, and growth as readers.
 - Examples may include youth-led book clubs, genre exploration challenges, youth-curated displays, peer book reviews, author studies, literacy-connected enrichment projects, and family literacy events.

High School: Reading Leadership & Lifelong Literacy

For programs serving high school participants, the focus is on sustaining reading identity and developing literacy leadership.

Youth may:

- a. Maintain and deepen voluntary reading habits with full choice over what and how they read.
- b. Serve as reading mentors and near-peer leaders for younger youth in the community.
- c. Curate collections, lead book discussions, and shape program reading culture.
- d. Connect literacy to future pathways, including education careers and community leadership.
- e. Reflect on how reading connects to their goals, identity, and civic life.
- f. Examples may include near-peer reading programs, youth-led literacy clubs, book review and recommendation projects, community literacy events, and connections to the education career pathway.

Understanding the High School Component: The Literacy Pathway distinguishes between high school youth enrolled as participants in afterschool or summer programs that serve grades 9–12 and high school youth employed as program staff in programs that serve elementary or middle school youth. The developmental progression described above applies to youth participating in programs serving grades 9–12. High school staff development is addressed separately through the statewide High School Staff Postsecondary Planning Development Initiative described in the grant overview section, although programs are encouraged to incorporate high school staff into pathway activities through near-peer reading leadership opportunities when appropriate.

Required Design Elements

All Literacy Pathway programs must incorporate the following elements:

Element 1: Book Access & Reading Environment

Programs must set up and maintain a bookstand and reading area with cozy seating, good lighting, and a curated, diverse book collection that youth can access freely. Programs can use funds to restock books throughout the contract period, curating book selection based on youth interest.

Element 2: District Alignment and Literacy-Rich Programming

Programs must incorporate literacy-rich activities into their programming which align with district literacy goals. Alignment with district literacy goals means awareness and communication, not duplication. Programs build reading joy, choice, and volume while the school day builds reading

skills. Programs are also encouraged to integrate literacy across enrichment activities so that books connect to clubs, projects, and youth interests in creative ways.

Element 3: Family Literacy Connections

Programs must purchase a set of Literacy Take Home Backpacks developed by Nebraska Extension and create a checkout and restocking system. Programs can also engage families through at least one additional strategy.

Examples include:

- a. Family reading events
- b. Linked2Literacy's Book Bridge Program
- c. Family story hours or book celebrations
- d. Home library building
- e. Bilingual family literacy resources

Element 4: Staff as Reading Culture Creators

Programs must participate in BSB-provided professional development in building reading cultures. Staff should develop the ability to book-talk with young people, curate book selections based on youth interests, and create environments where choosing to read is the norm. Afterschool staff are reading culture creators, not reading teachers.

Element 5: Youth Reflection & Voice

Programs must provide opportunities for youth to reflect on their reading lives and shape the reading culture around them and must administer required student and/or family surveys during BSB survey windows.

Examples may include youth book reviews, youth-led book selection, reading interest surveys, reading challenges youth design, discussions, showcases, or other reflection strategies.

Element 6: Community Literacy Partnerships

Programs must engage at least one Community Literacy Partner and **provide a brief letter of support with the application.** Community Literacy Partners help strengthen reading culture by connecting youth and families to literacy-rich experiences, resources, and opportunities beyond the afterschool program.

Examples may include:

- a. Public and/or school libraries
- b. Community foundations
- c. Local businesses and/or postsecondary institutions
- d. Museums and cultural organizations
- e. Early childhood organizations
- f. Literacy-focused nonprofits
- g. Local authors, storytellers, or community readers
- h. Other community organizations that support literacy and learning

Community Literacy Partners may contribute through book access, volunteer reading support, literacy events, family engagement activities, guest readers, shared resources, or other strategies that strengthen reading culture.

The goal is to help young people see reading as something that extends beyond the program itself and is supported by families, schools, and the broader community. By building community partnerships around literacy, programs help position Expanded Learning Opportunities as important contributors to local literacy goals and lifelong learning.

Bringing the Framework to Life

The Literacy Pathway is not intended to prescribe a single program model. Rather, it provides a common framework that allows communities to design reading cultures that reflect local strengths, languages, and youth interests while contributing to broader statewide goals.

Whether youth are discovering the joy of books in elementary school, expanding their reading identity in middle school, or leading reading culture in high school, the common thread is helping young people experience reading as something they choose. By combining abundant book access, literacy-rich programming, family connections, staff who model reading enthusiasm, and youth voice, Expanded Learning Opportunities can play a vital role in building the reading identity that carries young people toward proficiency and lifelong success.

Through this work, Catalyst-funded programs contribute not only to the success of individual youth, but also to Nebraska's broader goals for third grade reading proficiency, educational attainment, and thriving communities.

RUBRIC GUIDE: LITERACY PATHWAY

What We're Looking For

The Literacy Pathway is designed to help young people fall in love with reading, build reading identity, access abundant and diverse books, and develop the foundational skills that support lifelong success.

Strong applications do not need to implement every possible literacy strategy. Rather, they should demonstrate a clear, age-appropriate approach to building a reading culture where choosing to read is the norm.

Applications will be scored on a 20-point rubric scale. More information is provided below.

1. Reading Culture & Book Access (4 points)

Strong applications establish inviting reading environments with abundant, diverse books that youth can browse freely and take home.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. A clear plan for the bookstand and reading area, including what will make it inviting.
- b. Abundant, diverse books that reflect the youth served, including languages spoken at home.
- c. Plans to keep the collection fresh and restocked throughout the year.
- d. Examples may include cozy reading corners, youth-curated displays, book swaps, themed collections, reading celebrations, and bilingual books.

2. District Alignment and Literacy-Rich Programming (4 points)

Strong applications provide engaging literacy experiences that feel distinctly afterschool: hands-on, joyful, and driven by choice rather than assignment.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. Awareness of district literacy goals, learned through direct communication with school partners.
- b. A plan to complement, not duplicate, school-day reading instruction.
- c. Literacy integrated into enrichment activities, with books connecting to clubs, projects, and youth interests.
- d. Near-peer reading leadership where appropriate, with older youth or high school staff leading literacy lessons.
- e. Experiences that complement, rather than replicate, the school day.
- f. Examples may include, literacy-themed clubs, books connected to cooking, art, STEM, or movement, read-alouds, book talks, and author visits.

3. Family Literacy Engagement (4 points)

Strong applications extend reading culture into the home and engage families as genuine literacy partners.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. A clear plan for the Literacy Take Home Backpack checkout system.
- b. At least one additional family engagement strategy.

- c. Families invited into reading culture as partners, not just an audience.
- d. Approaches responsive to family languages, schedules, and circumstances.
- e. Examples may include family reading events, Linked2Literacy's Book Bridge Program, family story hours, home library building, and bilingual family resources.

4. Staff as Reading Culture Creators (4 points)

Strong applications prepare staff to build reading culture — not to teach reading. Afterschool staff are reading culture creators.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. Plans for staff to participate in BSB-provided professional development on building reading culture.
- b. Staff who will book-talk with young people and know their readers.
- c. Staff roles in curating selections and creating environments where reading is the norm.
- d. Evidence that staff enthusiasm for books will be visible to youth.

5. Youth Reflection, Voice & Choice (4 points)

Strong applications give young people genuine ownership of the reading culture and opportunities to reflect on their identity as readers.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. Youth voice in book selection, displays, and reading activities.
- b. Reflection opportunities embedded throughout programming.
- c. Opportunities for youth to identify reading interests and strengths.
- d. Activities that help youth see themselves as readers.
- e. Examples may include youth book reviews, youth-led book selection, reading challenges youth design, interest surveys, discussions, and showcases.

6. Alignment with Local Context (4 points)

Strong applications reflect the unique strengths, needs, languages, and opportunities within their communities.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. Alignment with community demographics, including home languages.
- b. Connections to local literacy assets.
- c. Realistic implementation plans.
- d. Reading culture responsive to the youth being served.
- e. Programs are encouraged to draw on local assets such as public libraries, school partnerships, bilingual community resources, local authors and storytellers, and service organizations.

Overall Consideration

The strongest applications will demonstrate a coherent approach that helps youth:

- a. Discover the joy of reading.
- b. See themselves as readers.
- c. Access abundant, diverse books at the program and at home.
- d. Connect reading to their interests, families, and communities.

e. Build the voluntary reading habits that support lifelong success.

While the long-term goal is to contribute to increased third grade reading proficiency and educational attainment, the Literacy Pathway recognizes that reading identity develops through joy, choice, and belonging. Reading development is a process that begins long before proficiency is measured.

Rubric Scoring

20–24 Points: Highly competitive application. Strong alignment with Literacy Pathway goals and strong potential for youth impact.

15-19 Points: Competitive application. Demonstrates clear pathway alignment and implementation readiness, with opportunities for refinement through coaching and technical assistance.

11–14 Points: Moderately competitive application. Shows promise but may require significant technical assistance, partnership development, or pathway clarification.

0–10 Points: Limited alignment with Literacy Pathway expectations. Significant revision or additional support would likely be needed prior to funding.

WORKFORCE EXPLORATION PATHWAY FRAMEWORK

Purpose

The Workforce Exploration Pathway helps young people discover future possibilities, connect learning to real-world opportunities, develop durable skills, and build confidence in their ability to pursue meaningful futures.

While Nebraska’s long-term education and workforce goals include increased postsecondary enrollment and workforce participation, career development begins long before a young person makes decisions about college, training, or employment. Expanded Learning Opportunities are uniquely positioned to help youth explore interests, develop skills, connect with community partners, and better understand the pathways available to them.

Through age-appropriate experiences, youth build awareness of future opportunities, explore potential pathways, and develop the skills and relationships that support long-term success.

Theory of Change

When young people are exposed to future possibilities, engage in hands-on career-connected learning experiences, develop durable skills, connect with adults and organizations in their communities, and reflect on their interests and strengths, they become better prepared to navigate future pathways and achieve long-term success.

Core Question: How do we help youth imagine, explore, and prepare for future pathways?

Developmental Progression

Elementary School: Future Pathways Awareness

At the elementary level, the focus is on helping youth discover interests, strengths, and possibilities.

Youth may:

- a. Explore careers and community roles.
- b. Learn how reading, math, problem-solving, and teamwork connect to future opportunities.
- c. Develop confidence, curiosity, and a growth mindset.
- d. Meet adults who use different skills and talents in their work.
- e. Begin identifying personal interests and strengths.

Examples may include career-themed clubs, guest speakers, family career spotlights, STEM and HEAL exploration activities, entrepreneurship projects, service-learning experiences, and field trips.

Middle School: Future Pathways Exploration

At the middle school level, the focus shifts to exploration and helping youth connect interests and strengths to future opportunities.

Youth may:

- a. Explore a variety of career fields, industries, and community roles.

- b. Learn about education, training, and credential pathways related to different careers.
- c. Develop leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills.
- d. Engage in career-connected projects and community-based learning experiences.
- e. Reflect on personal interests, goals, and future possibilities.

Examples may include career exploration clubs, workplace visits, industry projects, career interest assessments, guest speakers, mentoring, service learning, and partnerships with local employers, postsecondary institutions, and community organizations.

High School: Future Pathways Preparation

For programs serving high school participants, the focus is on helping youth prepare for future education, training, and career opportunities.

Youth may:

- a. Explore postsecondary education, training, and credential opportunities.
- b. Participate in work-based learning and career-connected experiences.
- c. Build professional and leadership skills.
- d. Develop personal goals and future plans.
- e. Strengthen connections between education, careers, and community opportunities.

Examples may include internships, job shadowing, mentorship, industry projects, postsecondary visits, entrepreneurship experiences, leadership programs, and credential opportunities.

Understanding the High School Component: The Workforce Exploration Pathway distinguishes between high school youth enrolled as participants in afterschool or summer programs that serve grades 9-12 and high school youth employed as program staff in programs that serve elementary or middle school youth. The developmental progression described above applies to youth participating in programs serving grades 9-12. High school staff development is addressed separately through the statewide High School Staff Postsecondary Planning Development Initiative described in the grant overview section, although programs may choose to incorporate high school staff into pathway activities through near-peer leadership opportunities when appropriate.

Required Design Elements

All Workforce Exploration Pathway programs must incorporate the following elements:

Element 1: Career-Connected Learning

Programs must provide intentional career-connected learning opportunities through either:

- a. A structured curriculum, club, project, or programming strand focused on career exploration; or
- b. A series of career-connected experiences such as guest speakers, workplace visits, career fairs, field trips, community partnerships, or similar activities.

Element 2: Durable Skill Development

Programs must intentionally help youth develop durable skills that support success in school, work, and life, such as:

- a. Communication

- b. Collaboration
- c. Leadership
- d. Problem solving
- e. Critical thinking
- f. Goal setting
- g. Growth mindset

Element 3: Future Pathways Connections

Programs must help youth understand connections between their interests, learning experiences, and future opportunities through age-appropriate exploration of careers, education, training, entrepreneurship, and community leadership.

Element 4: Family Connections to Future Pathways

Engage families as partners in helping youth explore future possibilities and understand connections between learning, education, careers, and community. Programs should implement at least one intentional family engagement strategy that helps families participate in or reinforce Workforce Exploration activities.

Examples may include:

- a. Parent or caregiver career spotlights through interviews about careers, skills, or educational experiences
- b. Family participation in career fairs or pathway events
- c. Postsecondary exploration events for youth and families
- d. Take-home activities that encourage discussion about interests, strengths, and future goals
- e. Family participation in youth showcases or presentations
- f. Bilingual resources that support future pathways conversations at home

The goal is to help families engage in conversations about future possibilities, celebrate youth interests and strengths, and serve as important partners in helping young people imagine and pursue meaningful futures.

Element 5: Community Partnership

Programs must engage at least one Future Pathways Partner and **provide a brief letter of support with the application.**

Examples include:

- a. Employers
- b. Postsecondary institutions
- c. Chambers of commerce
- d. Libraries
- e. Extension offices
- f. Healthcare organizations
- g. Community-based organizations
- h. Industry associations
- i. Public agencies

Element 6: Youth Reflection

Programs must provide opportunities for youth to reflect on their experiences, interests, strengths, goals, and future possibilities.

Examples may include journals, discussions, presentations, showcases, goal-setting activities, interest inventories, or other reflection strategies.

Bringing the Framework to Life

The Workforce Exploration Pathway is not intended to prescribe a single program model. Rather, it provides a common framework that allows communities to design experiences that reflect local strengths, opportunities, and youth interests while contributing to broader statewide goals.

Whether youth are discovering possibilities in elementary school, exploring pathways in middle school, or preparing for future opportunities in high school, the common thread is helping young people connect their interests, learning, and experiences to meaningful futures. By combining career-connected learning, durable skill development, community partnerships, and youth reflection, Expanded Learning Opportunities can play a vital role in helping young people navigate future pathways and achieve long-term success.

Through this work, Catalyst-funded programs contribute not only to the success of individual youth, but also to Nebraska's broader goals for postsecondary enrollment, workforce development, and thriving communities.

Additional Resources

Nebraska Career Cluster Wheel to help applicants think about jobs and opportunities for career-connected learning in our state: <https://www.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/CTEModel-8.5x11-RGB-2.pdf>

Pathway2Careers website to help determine local workforce needs: <https://dashboard.pathway2careers.com/ne/your-area>

Pathway2Careers website to look at data specific to school district to help think through local needs and priorities: <https://dashboard.pathway2careers.com/ne>

RUBRIC GUIDE: WORKFORCE EXPLORATION PATHWAY

What We're Looking For

The Workforce Exploration Pathway is designed to help young people discover future possibilities, connect learning to real-world opportunities, develop durable skills, and build confidence in their ability to pursue meaningful futures.

Strong applications do not need to implement every possible workforce exploration strategy. Rather, they should demonstrate a clear, age-appropriate approach to helping youth understand and navigate future pathways.

Applications will be scored on a 20-point rubric scale. More information is provided below.

1. Future Pathways Awareness, Exploration, or Preparation (4 points)

Strong applications provide intentional opportunities for youth to explore future possibilities in developmentally appropriate ways.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. Clear connections between program activities and future pathways.
- b. Age-appropriate approaches based on youth served.
- c. Opportunities for youth to learn about careers, education, training, entrepreneurship, and community leadership.
- d. Experiences that help youth connect learning today to opportunities tomorrow.

Examples may include career-connected curricula, guest speakers, career fairs, workplace visits, entrepreneurship activities, career-themed clubs, mentoring, service-learning projects, or work-based learning experiences.

2. Career-Connected Learning (4 points)

Strong applications provide hands-on experiences that help youth understand how skills and knowledge are applied in real-world settings.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. Intentional career-connected learning opportunities.
- b. Hands-on, engaging experiences.
- c. Opportunities for youth to interact with professionals, organizations, or real-world challenges.
- d. Connections between program content and future opportunities.

Programs may implement a structured curriculum, club, project-based learning experience, or a series of intentional career-connected activities.

3. Durable Skill Development (4 points)

Strong applications intentionally help youth develop skills that support long-term success across education, work, and life.

Reviewers will look for plans and activities that help youth build the following skills:

- a. Communication
- b. Collaboration
- c. Leadership
- d. Critical thinking
- e. Problem solving
- f. Goal setting
- g. Growth mindset

Programs should demonstrate how these skills will be practiced and reinforced through pathway activities.

4. Community Partnership (4 points)

Strong applications engage community partners in helping youth understand future pathways.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. At least one identified Future Pathways Partner.
- b. Meaningful partner involvement beyond simple endorsement.
- c. Connections to local opportunities and community assets.
- d. Evidence that partners will help youth better understand future possibilities.

Future Pathways Partners may include employers, postsecondary institutions, libraries, healthcare organizations, chambers of commerce, Extension offices, public agencies, community organizations, or industry groups.

5. Youth Reflection and Voice (4 points)

Strong applications provide opportunities for youth to reflect on experiences, interests, strengths, goals, and future possibilities.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. Reflection activities embedded throughout programming.
- b. Opportunities for youth to identify interests and strengths.
- c. Youth voice in shaping experiences when appropriate.
- d. Activities that help youth make meaning of what they have learned.

Examples may include journals, discussions, presentations, showcases, goal-setting activities, interest inventories, or youth-led projects.

6. Alignment with Local Context (4 points)

Strong applications reflect the unique strengths, needs, and opportunities within their communities.

Reviewers will look for:

- a. Alignment with local industries and community assets.
- b. Connections to local education and workforce priorities.
- c. Realistic implementation plans.
- d. Opportunities that are responsive to the youth being served.

Programs are encouraged to focus on sectors that are relevant to their community, including but not limited to healthcare and HEAL fields, STEM and technology, agriculture and natural resources, skilled trades and manufacturing, entrepreneurship, education, public service, and arts and creative industries.

Overall Consideration

The strongest applications will demonstrate a coherent approach that helps youth:

- a. Discover their interests and strengths.
- b. Explore future possibilities.
- c. Develop durable skills.
- d. Build connections with their communities.
- e. Gain confidence in their ability to pursue meaningful futures.

While the long-term goal is to contribute to increased postsecondary success and workforce readiness, the Workforce Exploration Pathway recognizes that career development is a developmental process that begins long before young people make decisions about education, training, or employment.

Rubric Scoring

20–24 Points: Highly competitive application. Strong alignment with Workforce Exploration Pathway goals and strong potential for youth impact.

15–19 Points: Competitive application. Demonstrates clear pathway alignment and implementation readiness, with opportunities for refinement through coaching and technical assistance.

11–14 Points: Moderately competitive application. Shows promise but may require significant technical assistance, partnership development, or pathway clarification.

0–10 Points: Limited alignment with Workforce Exploration Pathway expectations. Significant revision or additional support would likely be needed prior to funding.

APPENDIX

Additional Resources

Nebraska Career Cluster Wheel to help applicants think about jobs and opportunities for career-connected learning in our state: <https://www.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/CTEModel-8.5x11-RGB-2.pdf>

Pathway2Careers website to help determine local workforce needs: <https://dashboard.pathway2careers.com/ne/your-area>

Pathway2Careers website to look at data specific to school district to help think through local needs and priorities: <https://dashboard.pathway2careers.com/ne>

DOWNLOAD THE APPLICATIONS

The **Literacy Pathway Application** and the **Workforce Exploration Pathway Application** can be downloaded from the Beyond School Bells website at: <https://beyondschoolbells.org/what-we-do/innovative-programming/funding-opportunities/funding-application-process.html>