

Effective Practices:

Leadership Teams and Task Forces

The Launch Years Initiative (LYI) supports states in aligning mathematics pathways from high school to postsecondary education to increase student success and degree attainment.

Since 2022, the Charles A. Dana Center has been collaborating with 22 states to work toward this goal. It became clear that having a strong, stable, and organized LYI leadership team, task force, and working group is an essential component in a state's successful progress.



The Dana Center identified essential practices related to the composition and operations of these groups. Regarding group composition, a multitude of states experienced two main challenges—leadership turnover, and a lack of diversity of roles and of demographics—that hindered their progress. In addition, some states had difficulty in completing or managing functions related to operations. This report shares experiences from states and offers recommendations to set the stage for effective work.

Group Composition

One of the key facets for successful Launch Years work is identifying and recruiting an effective leadership team and task force. The leadership team is typically a small core group of individuals that recruits the larger task force, schedules and facilitates meetings, coordinates with the Dana Center and other technical assistance partners, and manages the operational components of the work.¹

State leadership teams and their task forces encountered two big challenges that affected their work: leadership turnover and a lack of diversity in their group makeup. They also experienced smaller issues that sometimes hampered the momentum of their work.

For example, many leadership teams found it difficult to find a common meeting time for all members to attend, and the problem was compounded for the task forces, which required more coordination due to the number of members. It is crucial, therefore, that all members of the leadership teams and task forces prioritize the Launch Years and pathways alignment work, especially in cases where scheduling conflicts arise. Prioritizing LYI may require adding the Launch Years work in formal job descriptions, getting explicit buy-in and support from superiors, and setting a standing meeting time.

Another related issue was capacity: Members of the leadership teams and task forces often did not have time to develop recommendations and implementation plans themselves. One strategy employed by states was to recruit working groups to focus on specific areas or tasks, spreading the workload among more stakeholders. Led by the leadership team and/or task force, these working groups were able to engage with a broader set of stakeholders and included more diverse perspectives.

¹ Some states use different names for leadership team and task force to suit their local context.



Effective strategies that can support Launch Years work:

- Set a **standard meeting time**.
- Get explicit **buy-in and support** from superiors.
- Recruit **working groups** to work on specific areas or tasks.

Key Challenge: Leadership Turnover

While turnover is common in long-term projects, some teams found it to be more disruptive to their leadership team's functioning than other challenges. The teams for whom the transition was least problematic, however, often had one or more of the following conditions in place.



A leadership team comprising of 5 or 6 members

A team of this size is large enough to ensure stability if one or two individuals leave, but it is also small enough to schedule meetings more easily. States with only one or two leaders found that their work was dramatically disrupted, or difficult to restart, when one or both leaders left the state or their LYI roles. Having some continuity of membership during transitions enables the work to continue with minimal interruption.



A succession plan

Even in a leadership team of 5 or 6 members, there are often one or two people who schedule and coordinate meetings, send reminders, communicate with the task force, and complete administrative tasks for the team. Having identified other people who are familiar with aspects of those duties (e.g., email lists, location of agendas, process for reserving rooms or setting up calls), and who can assume those roles quickly, ensures less disruption to the team's work.



A centralized space for running notes

A consequence of turnover is often the loss of knowledge when a member leaves a project. Teams with a centralized space for taking notes throughout the project can direct new members to those notes for a smooth onboarding process. The notes are also extremely helpful to current members, who can refer to past learnings and processes when needed.

Key Challenge: Lack of Diversity

The purpose of the leadership team, task force, and working group is to gather relevant information about math pathways in high school and postsecondary education, and across the transition between the systems; synthesize the information to develop recommendations; and work to implement those recommendations. Several types of diversity within the groups are necessary for these processes to be effective and relevant in the local context.



Demographic diversity

Education systems within a state serve students who have a variety of lived experiences and ways of interacting with the systems. To make recommendations that serve all students, individuals with similarly diverse backgrounds must be represented in the task force and, ideally, the leadership team. If there is still a lack of diversity among the K–12 and higher education members of LYI, it is important to find ways of including the voices of diverse students and communities.

Ethnic diversity

Most of the current LYI task force members identify as “white (non-Hispanic).” Very few Launch Years states have leadership teams, task forces, and/or working groups whose ethnic and racial demographics reflect their state’s student demographics. Leadership teams should identify individuals for the task force who may not have been previously involved with state-level initiatives, but who will bring valuable and previously unheard perspectives to the work.

Gender diversity

The majority of current task force members are female. Teams should be intentional in recruiting male and nonbinary members to task forces and working groups to include different voices.

Economic diversity

The Launch Years work needs to meet the needs of many types of students—rural, urban, and students experiencing poverty, to name a few. Having task force and working group members who have experienced the education system from these and other contexts is crucial to ensure that recommendations and implementation plans will serve all students, not just those who attend well-funded and “high-performing” institutions.



Role diversity

Representatives from higher education and K–12 systems play essential roles on leadership teams, as they are familiar with their state’s policy and governance landscape and the corresponding levers for change within their state. However, many LYI teams have found that other roles are equally important in providing different expertise, experience, and perspectives.

State-level data or institutional research experts

Someone (or possibly two or more individuals) needs to know what data are gathered in the state and by whom, how to request that data, and how to analyze the data.

Postsecondary student representatives

The work of the task force will shape students' educational experiences so students should be involved in the analysis, planning, and, when appropriate, implementation stages.

Family or community representatives

Similarly, parents and other family members of K–12 students should be actively engaged in the analysis, planning, and, when appropriate, implementation stages.

Advisors and counselors

Students receive much of their information about which courses to take and when from advisors and counselors. Ensuring common messaging and a common understanding of the reasoning behind math pathways is crucial for accurate advising. Advisors and counselors also have a different perspective on student needs and challenges, which should be considered during all stages of the work.

Geographic diversity



A common challenge in recruiting task forces and working groups is bringing people together to work in person. It is easier, of course, to convene all participants who work near one another. However, neglecting to include participants from parts of the state that are outside of urban centers decreases the applicability of any recommendations and plans. Experts from these regions can help identify solutions for specific situations (e.g., regions with a small teacher pool, regions that may not have enough students to support multiple math pathways offerings).

Group Operations

Several operational practices supported effective and sustainable leadership teams and task forces. For example, having regularly scheduled meetings with predetermined, shared agendas at a set time made it easier for members to protect the meeting times from other work obligations and scheduling conflicts. In-person meetings held at least once annually helped build relationships among team members. Having a centralized location for agendas, notes, working documents, final documents, and mailing lists enabled quicker onboarding for new members. Information in that shared space also helped members to stay up to date if they missed a meeting; it also served as a record of assigned activities and deadlines, and as an effective way to communicate with various stakeholder groups.

Other operational strategies assisted working groups in managing conflicting opinions and holding challenging, but important, conversations. For example:

- Assigning roles (e.g., timekeeper, notetakers, scheduler)
- Codeveloping engagement norms and revisiting them annually
- Recognizing who has social capital in various realms that can be leveraged when case making to the broader state audience
- Being intentional about including leadership team and task force members when the work does not directly relate to their areas of expertise (e.g., identifying specific input and feedback from higher education leaders when the group is developing recommendations geared toward high school policies and practices)

Conclusion

The work done by states to align math pathways in the high school to postsecondary education space is complex and multifaceted. Having a cohesive leadership team and task force makes the work easier to manage, shares the workload and responsibilities, and enables states to make recommendations and implementation plans that will serve all students in their state.



While it is tempting to begin analyzing data and making plans, the most effective groups take the time—from the beginning—to establish norms and relationships, determine which populations are not represented in the group and intentionally recruit additional members to include different perspectives, assign roles, determine a structure and cadence for meetings, and set a shared workspace.

These actions can help the leadership teams, task forces, and working groups avoid or mitigate the key challenges listed in this report, allowing them to focus on the complex interpersonal and structural barriers to aligned math pathways from high school to postsecondary education. Overcoming these barriers will help ensure that students can smoothly transition, increasing their success in mathematics.

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