Youth Voice Hawai'i

Year 1 Report

November 2021

Prepared for:

Founded in 1962, the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation works to build resources for Hawai'i's future. We do so by investing in promising initiatives and organizations through grantmaking, using our convening power, and introducing and spreading new ideas and approaches to help solve some of Hawai'i's most pressing problems.

Prepared by:

Learning for Action's (LFA) mission is to partner with social sector organizations to advance knowledge, capacity, and culture of learning in the service of equity and justice. Since our start in 2000, we have engaged with hundreds of organizations across the United States and internationally to collect and interpret the data they need to design and implement strategies that achieve their desired impact.

Executive Summary

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The Harold K.L. Castle Foundation is committed to supporting Hawai'i's youth to fulfill their most ambitious dreams. Currently, far too many students are still falling short of achieving their dreams despite the system's focus on strengthening college and career pathways. While a lot is known about how students are fairing along these pathways (based on measures such as K-12 academic performance, high school graduation, and college enrollment and completion), these data do not tell the full story of the student experience, and what is supporting or getting in their way of success. Understanding the student experience, as well as the attitudes, values, and beliefs they hold about college and career, is critical to understanding underlying dynamics. To this end, the foundation has made a multi-year investment to deepen the field's understanding of the student experience, attitudes, values, and beliefs to inform ongoing policy and practice. This report presents findings from the first year of this study, primarily focused on understanding the perspectives and experiences of high-school age students.

Core Findings

Hawai'i's young people have ambitious dreams that center on personal fulfillment and happiness. Youth also seek independence, stability, and financial security, though the latter can be in tension with what brings them joy. While some youth have clear, specific education and career goals, not all youth have plans for how they will achieve their ultimate vision. Regardless of whether youth have a fully developed vision or plan, most youth seem to struggle with self-doubt, uncertainty, and stress. Discussed in *Youth's Future Goals and Aspirations*.

As young people develop and pursue their goals and aspirations, students are influenced by the people and environment around them. **Students thrive when the people in their lives and community are supportive and positive influences**. In particular, students are best supported when their family, peers, and others adults in their lives are a source of inspiration; offer guidance and encouragement; set expectations in ways that center their needs and goals; and facilitate exposure to and access to opportunities. However, far too many students are experiencing barriers such as low expectations, pressure to pursue pathways that feel disconnected from their vision, and limited access to opportunities. Discussed in *Spheres of Influence.*

Given our focus on the high school experience, we dive deeper into how high schools are supporting students to develop and pursue their goals and aspirations. We heard from high school students and school staff about three areas for improvement that are highly important and where school system partners have a lot of influence:
- **Academic relevance** - greater alignment between what students are learning in school and their intended future plans and job opportunities in the market

Executive Summary

- **Life skill preparation** - more opportunities to develop social emotional skills (e.g. goal setting and self-management) and practical skills (e.g. financial literacy) that will support them in adulthood
- **Access to information and exposure to pathways** - more supports for students to understand pathway options and develop transition plans aligned with their goals

It is especially critical that these areas are strengthened with an eye toward equity to ensure that *all* students have access to the same opportunities. School staff and students shared that opportunities are often concentrated in schools/communities that are well resourced, or directed to the students who are most proactive. Discussed in *School System Levers*

System Opportunities

Reflecting and drawing on the findings above, we identified three areas to prioritize in service of supporting youth to fulfill their most ambitious dreams:
- **Mental Health and Student Well-Being**: Prominent feelings of stress, anxiety, overwhelm, and self-doubt among youth point to a need to focus on social-emotional skills and mental health supports.
- **Family Engagement and Collaboration**: The important influence that family has on youth development, wellness, and outcomes calls for system-level strategies and tools that facilitate positive and productive family engagement and collaboration.
- **Information and Exposure to Pathways**: Students' limited use of existing college and career transition resources suggests an opportunity to improve how information about potential pathways is shared with students.

We believe that these supports are *most* urgent for students who are disproportionately affected by inequitable access to opportunity and resources, negative narratives, and biased mindsets that perpetuate and reinforce low expectations for students.

Executive Summary

<u>Future Direction of Research</u>

[Pending further discussion]

Approach and Methods

Participatory Evaluation Approach

Data Collection Methods

Youth Participant Recruitment

Youth Participants

Participatory Evaluation Approach

Given the evaluation goals of generating insights about the student experience and amplifying and centering student voices, we implemented **participatory evaluation** methods to engage students as partners throughout the evaluation process. We selected this approach because of its promise to yield results that are locally relevant, empower and build capacity among participants, and disrupt power dynamics baked into traditional evaluation approaches.

A critical component of the participatory evaluation approach was the engagement of a **Youth Advisory Group (YAG)**. The evaluation team worked with the Center for Tomorrow's Leaders to identify and engage current and recently graduated Hawai'i public high school students to join the YAG to shape the evaluation.

The YAG's input helped to ensure that the evaluation questions focused on those things that matter most to young people in Hawai'i when considering next steps in their futures.

- The first YAG cohort, engaged over the 2020 summer, provided feedback on the research questions, data collection methods, and data collection instruments. Their input also ensured that the language and framing of the questions would resonate with young people, and accurately target the types of information we were seeking.
- The second YAG cohort, engaged over the 2021 summer, contributed to the analysis and interpretation of data from their peers. They helped to identify themes from the data and supported the research team's effort to make meaning of the qualitative data collected from other students.

Youth Advisory Group Profile

The 2020 YAG cohort included eight students ranging from high school sophomores to college freshmen. The students represented high schools from Oahu, the Big Island, and Lana'i.

The 2021 YAG cohort included eight students ranging from high school juniors to college sophomores. The students represented high schools from Oahu and the Big Island. For continuity, three students from the 2020 cohort also participated in the 2021 cohort.

Data Collection Methods

The evaluation included four types of data collection:

1. **Youth Focus Groups** - 44 youth
2. **Youth Photovoice Projects** - 15 youth*
3. **Interviews with School Staff** - 8 school staff, including school counselors, counseling department heads, curriculum coordinators, and teachers (who also instruct in career and college pathways)
4. **Review of Publicly Available Data**

The evaluation team, in collaboration with the YAG, selected the first two methods because of their potential to surface deep, rich stories about students' college and career goals and their experiences trying to achieve those goals. To supplement and triangulate the stories collected from youth, the evaluation team conducted interviews with school staff and reviewed publicly available data. The evaluation team considered a student survey but the YAG did *not* recommend this method. While students are familiar and comfortable with surveys, the YAG shared that students are over surveyed and, as a result, fill out surveys quickly - often times not reading the questions closely or responding without a lot of reflection.

Note about COVID-19: All data collection for this report happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, in our analysis we cannot completely disentangle themes (especially testimonies of fears, challenges, and stressors) from the context under which this research happened. However, through deep engagement and conversations with youth, we are confident that the concerns and barriers highlighted in this report were exacerbated, but not caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photovoice is a participatory method that empowers participants to tell their stories using photography and written narratives. This approach generates a visual representation of the participant's experience, which can be a powerful communication tool ("a picture is worth a thousand words").

Photovoice empowers participants by building their skills and confidence to tell their own story. Engagement with participants is designed to build deep, mutually beneficial relationships between the evaluators and participants, rather than extractive or one-directional interaction (i.e. the research benefits from the participant's time but not the other way around). Because this method is multi-modal (oral, written, visual) it also provides for diverse forms of self-expression, which is critical for inclusion of students with diverse expression styles and needs.

A downside of this approach is the need for extensive time and training for participants to complete a project.

*Though the number of youth who participated in photovoice was smaller than we had hoped for, the themes that emerged from the data were consistently surfaced by youth across diverse groups and across methods, suggesting that the themes are not outlier experiences. Additionally, many of the themes are also present in research others have conducted.

Youth Participant Recruitment

The evaluation team partnered with six high schools and five community-based organizations to identify and **engage 59 young people** across Hawai'i. Throughout the recruitment process, we worked to identify students who reflected a diversity of:

- Gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Grade/age
- Socioeconomic background
- Academic outcomes
- Plans for the future (if known)
- School experiences (e.g. participation in extracurricular activities or leadership programs)

We also invited school and community-based partners to consider other dimensions of diversity relevant to their contexts.

High School Partners
Campbell High School
Honoka'a High and Intermediate School
Pearl City High School
Radford High School
Waiākea High School
Wai'anae High School

Community-Based Organization Partners
Adult Friends for Youth
Hale Kipa
Hui Mālama O Ke Kai Foundation
Islander Institute
Kupu

The evaluation team encountered challenges in the recruitment of schools and participants due to the pandemic. The team initially reached out to ten high schools - with diverse student bodies and from across the islands of Hawai'i, Kauai, Maui, and Oahu - to participate in the study, but four declined due to limited capacity (related to the pandemic).

Outreach and recruitment of participants also required more effort and time due to students being virtual. Sharing information about and encouraging participation in the study was more difficult than if students were in person. School staff also shared that students were less willing and able to engage in activities such as this project because of burnout related to COVID. Ultimately, the evaluation team expanded outreach and recruitment to community-based organizations to fill the gap in participant numbers.

It is also important to acknowledge that due to the unique financial, physical, and emotional stressors and uncertainty of the time, the ability to participate in this research may have been more difficult for more vulnerable student populations. The evaluation team worked with coordinators on the ground to ensure that access to technology would not be a limiting factor, but there may have been other barriers to participation. Overall, the support of school staff and program coordinators was essential to the success of the research during this challenging time.

Youth Participants

Demographic Diversity
Participants were predominantly (72%) in their junior and senior year of high school (see Figure 11). About half (47%) identified as young women and nearly half (42%) identified as young men (see Figure 12). Participants largely reflected Hawai'i's racial and ethnic diversity. Nearly half (42%) identified as multiracial. When looking at race and ethnicity (alone or in combination), the three largest groups were Asian/Asian American (58%), Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (37%), and White/Caucasian (35%) (see Figure 13).

Island Diversity
Participants were from the islands of Hawai'i and Oahu. (As noted earlier, though we attempted to recruit youth from Kauai and Maui we did not ultimately achieve representation from these islands, largely due to the pandemic's impact on school and student capacity to participate.)

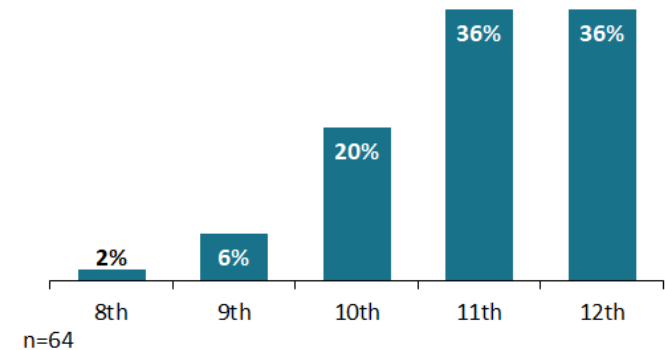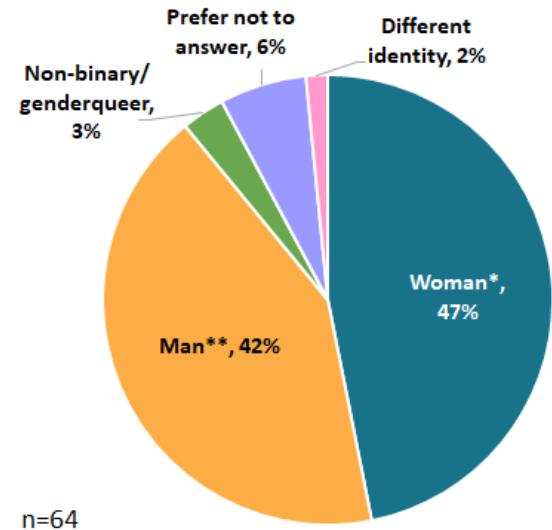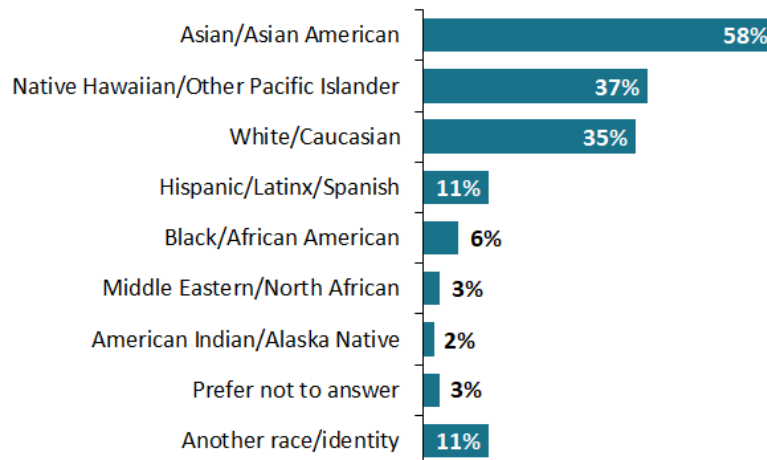**Figure 11. Grade Level of Participants**

8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
2%	6%	20%	36%	36%

n=64

Figure 12. Gender Identity of Youth Participants

Woman*, 47%; Man**, 42%; Non-binary/genderqueer, 3%; Prefer not to answer, 6%; Different identity, 2%

n=64
*Includes transgender women; **Includes transgender men

Figure 13. Race & Ethnicity (Alone or in Combination) of Youth Participants

- Asian/Asian American: 58%
- Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander: 37%
- White/Caucasian: 35%
- Hispanic/Latinx/Spanish: 11%
- Black/African American: 6%
- Middle Eastern/North African: 3%
- American Indian/Alaska Native: 2%
- Prefer not to answer: 3%
- Another race/identity: 11%

n=65
*The total for the race and ethnicity categories do not add up to 100% because they are not mutually exclusive; participants could check all identities that applied.

Youth's Future Goals and Aspirations

I hear the busy road and conversations. I smell the scent from the street vendors. I taste the money in my pockets. I feel inspired and want to work hard. I see hard work and dedication.

In my future, I want to achieve what I believe now to be unattainable. I envision myself flying, free, and achieving the impossible. In order to get there, I need to let go of my insecurities, troubles, and worries, and just strive to be the best version of myself.

Introduction

The Harold K.L. Castle Foundation's education strategy northstar is to support Hawaiʻi's youth to fulfill their most ambitious dreams. In our conversations with youth, we invited them to share the dreams they hold for themselves, asking "What are your goals for the future?" When talking with young people about their goals and how they view success, no restrictions were given, so youth could think as narrowly or expansively as made sense to them, and on short- or long-term timeframes.

While youth possess a wide range of hopes and ambitions, several themes emerged around their greatest aspirations. Young people's dreams center on personal fulfillment and happiness. Young people also seek independence, stability, and financial security, though the latter can be in tension with what brings them joy. While some youth have clear, specific education and career goals, not all youth have plans of how they will achieve their ultimate vision. Regardless of whether youth have a fully developed vision or plan, most youth seem to struggle with self-doubt, uncertainty, and stress. We expand on these themes in this section.

Freely floating. Bold and balanced. I aspire to go with the flow: rid of expectations, but guided by goals. I've never been able to map out my path, and thus dreaded answering the popular question of "what do you want to be in the future?" Because in all honesty, I have no clue. However, I can provide an answer to "who do you want to be in the future?" I want to be adaptable, brave, and considerate. Dynamic, educated, and forgiving. Granted, these are just words, but I hope to display them through actions. In this simultaneously judgmental yet kind atmosphere, watch as I attempt to stay afloat and keep moving forward.

What youth want or aspire to in their futures

When thinking about their futures, young people's long-term visions most often centered around personal fulfillment and happiness. Youth aspire to live a life aligned with their values; they define success as being happy or content with what they have done in their life, meeting their goals, overcoming obstacles, not giving up, continuing to grow and improve, and being proud of who they are. Young people hope to find jobs they enjoy, that provide opportunities to continue learning, or that allow them to experience new things. Many youth spoke of balance, believing emotional stability should be valued on par with financial success. Youth also want to have a sense of purpose, and many of their goals focused on helping others. Young people hope for futures that allow them to give back to and have a positive impact on their families, their community, and the world. Several spoke of their interest in volunteering and doing service work.

"To me, success means that I and the people around me are content and happy with their lives. In addition, I also see success as being stable financially, emotionally, socially, and mentally."
- Youth, 2021

"I want to be able to balance my life - work, family, free time, exercise, finding ways to be an ethical citizen, volunteering, giving back to those who have supported me."
- Youth, 2021

"I'll be successful if I can find a job that I actually enjoy and create fulfilling relationships. Having money would be good too, but to me, success is mostly being content with yourself and your life."
- Youth, 2021

Overwhelmingly, youth named stability and financial security as important factors as they think about their future. Youth want to be able to support themselves and their families (current or future family), live comfortably, rely on a steady income, not worry about student debt, and be able to afford to stay in Hawai'i. Developing a sense of independence is also of importance; young people want to feel as though they have "made it" and hold ambitions of buying a car, getting an apartment or house, having a family, and travelling.

What youth want or aspire to in their futures (continued)

While young people have a clear sense of what they want their futures to enable, they vary in the academic and career ambitions they hold for themselves. As might be expected, youths' goals and the steps they are considering to attain those goals exist on a spectrum. Some youth are uncertain about their specific objectives for future, or do not yet have a clear vision for what comes next. Others are focused on the imminent goal of graduating from high school. Yet, many youth hold **post-secondary academic aspirations**, expressing interest in going to college. In elaborating on their higher education plans, some youth explicitly shared their desire to go to a four-year university, the courses or fields of study they are interested in exploring, or their hope to pursue advanced degrees. Some youth expressed enthusiasm for the unique opportunities college has to offer, while others see college as a means to an end, or a way to achieve their overarching goals. For those youth, they see it as a necessary step to the career they hope for, the higher educational pursuits they have, or the comfort and stability they crave. Many youth did not provide context around the "why" of their college-related goals.

A similar diversity in responses were offered when young people reflected on their **career goals**. Many do not have a concrete idea of what they want their careers to be. For some, this is because they are still early in their planning or are focused on near-term goals. For others, they imagine more clarity will come with continued education and exposure. Some youth have a clear sense of what they would like to do, such as become an engineer, start their own business, or join the army. Several feel a tension between what they enjoy and what they believe is a stable career path.

System Implications/Opportunities

Mental Health & Student Wellbeing:
- School systems encourage students to develop a vision for themselves and understand the "why" of their goals, decentering the vision parents or teachers may have for a student.

Information & Exposure to Pathways:
- School systems provide individualized counseling supports and engagement opportunities for youth, that meet them where they are in their process or planning stage. Young people who are early in their planning or are uncertain about their vision and goals could use the most support.

How youth think and feel about their future

While youth have many dreams, they also experience stress and apprehension as they think about their futures. The sources of their worry were most frequently related to general uncertainty, financial stressors, and self-doubt.

When I think about my future, a bunch of things come to mind. My career, my personal life, my friends, all of that. But challenges and barriers also come up. A challenge that I forsee in my future is my passion, or inner fire. There is no doubt that I have big dreams and that I want to achieve all of them. But what if that becomes my biggest challenge? What if I bite off more than I can chew? That's certainly something that comes up in my mind when I think about what will challenge me in my future.

Young people reported feelings of stress, overwhelm, uncertainty, or nervousness about their future. Much of this was related to feeling ill-prepared for what comes next. Some youth did not feel like they had a clear understanding of the options or pathways available to them. Others worried they do not have the adult skills to be successful on their own. For many, their sense of nervousness came from leaving their families.

Financial concerns are a tremendous source of stress for young people. Many students interested in college do not know how they will pay for it. Even those who were aware of (or have already received) scholarships, financial aid, or loans continue to feel the burden of taking on debt. Young people worry about the financial strain the cost of higher education will have on their family, particularly those from working class families, families with single income earners, or those with college-aged siblings (meaning two potential tuition payments). Financial challenges also extend beyond college. Youth often raised the cost of living in Hawaiʻi as prohibitive and worry about whether they will be able to afford a house, raise a family, or simply stay in the place they consider home. As previously noted, young people place high value on careers that will enable financial security; for some, the potential for stability is prioritized over finding a career path of interest. Youth who are currently trying to earn and save money have felt the impact of COVID-19, finding that places they would normally apply have been closed. In general, young people believe financial barriers will limit what they choose to pursue.

How youth think and feel about their future (continued)

Young people frequently experience a tension between what they feel drawn to do, and what they feel they *should* do. In some instances, this tension comes from societal pressures. Several youth talked about regularly hearing messages about the value of certain types of jobs or narrow versions of what career success can look like. Young people who are interested in social sciences, non-corporate careers, or non-college pathways do not feel like this vision for themselves fits the mold of what is deemed acceptable. In other cases, this tension comes from internal conflict over competing priorities. Because financial concerns are so prevalent in young people's minds, some youth feel the need to choose income and stability over careers they believe will make them happy. There is a sense that to follow one's happiness may come into direct conflict with one's ability to support themselves.

"I struggle with what I want to be because in the back of my head I always have that thought of money and if I can support myself with the kind of job and education I want. I'm worried that if I do what I want to do, I won't be able to support myself."

- Youth, 2021

"Not everything is about the money. People get greedy with it. I feel like pushing the narrative that you can only be rich and successful through academics is very detrimental to kids and children. It's detrimental to mental health."

- Youth, 2021

Young people are thinking about the stability or future viability of career options. Some youth have looked at job market trends, and spoke about pursuing jobs in industries where there will be high demands for workers. A few are worried about how competitive the job market will be when they are ready to enter the workforce. Others talked about their intention to go into military service because of the benefits offered and accessibility of entry. Several youth believe there are not many jobs or that there are limited industries in Hawai'i. A few shared that there are opportunities that feel out of reach in Hawai'i but possible elsewhere.

How youth think and feel about their future (continued)

Young people commonly named self-doubt as a challenge when thinking about the future. Some youth worry explicitly about **whether they are "good enough"** to accomplish their goals, including getting into college, securing jobs of interest, or pursuing the lives they envision for themselves.

> *"So many students who apply to college have good grades and test scores but college like stuff that makes you unique and I don't have that. I work hard to do well academically all my life and I don't have anything else that makes me a special applicant."*
>
> - Youth, 2021

> *"My biggest challenge is me wondering if I'm good enough to get where I want to go. If my college application is good enough for the colleges I want to go to. Or, if my skill set is good enough for the jobs I want to go into. "*
>
> - Youth, 2021

Many youth **identified themselves as the biggest barrier** they see to achieving their future goals. Whether it is from lack of self-confidence, past experiences that have diminished their sense of their capabilities, or not having the skills or supports to process and move through the negative thoughts they have about themselves, youth worry they will get in their own way.

> *"I think sometimes when I have an opportunity, sometimes I doubt myself or I have certain feelings about things that hold me back on experiencing more. That would have to be one of my barriers - my doubt in my mind - maybe I shouldn't be here."*
>
> - Youth, 2021

> *"I feel like there are so many opportunities but if I can't find them or have the confidence to pursue them, they're just going to go by."*
>
> - Youth, 2021
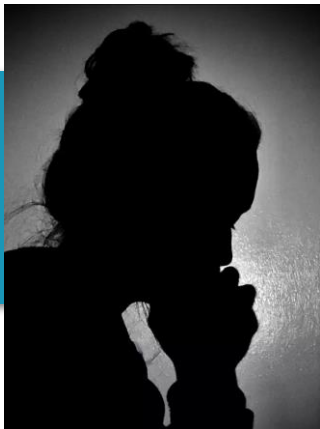
When I imagine my future, I overthink; and that overthinking leads to a downwards-spiraling of jumbled thoughts. What career will I pursue? What college will I go to? What will my future look like? Will I not like what I see? Will I regret my choices? As the saying goes: You are your worst critic. The only thing that's holding me back is myself.

How youth think and feel about their future (continued)

Youth explicitly named the need for mental health and wellness supports to address to address the feelings of stress and overwhelm they are experiencing. They want to be understood and treated as whole people. They believe more consideration should be given to the emotional weight many youth carry with them into classrooms, extracurricular programs, and the world at large. They also think the stigma around mental health may keep young people from accessing resources that may currently exist.

"Self-criticism comes from parents and teachers pressuring students to be the best, and you want to focus on something other than school. Be more lenient in terms of workload - you don't know what people are going through at home. Take mental health into consideration when planning things out."

- Youth, 2021

"When students go to therapy people think there must be something wrong with them. I think schools could provide places to go to safely talk about their feelings so it's more normalized."

- Youth, 2021

"I know a lot of us are very aware of our emotions. Maybe that is being a teenager. A lot of us don't want to talk about things – [adults should try] to get through to kids on an emotional side. It affects kids and what they want to do with their future and what they think they can accomplish."

- Youth, 2021

System Implications/Opportunities

Mental Health & Student Wellbeing:
- Schools and districts assess the mental health supports currently provided and offer more or improved resources.
- Schools prioritize youth as whole people, and focus on supporting youth in developing social-emotional skills.
- System actors collaborate to change narratives to support a positive vision of youth, their capabilities, and the possible pathways that exist for them. While some feelings of stress and uncertainty are developmentally appropriate, young people have deeply internalized the weight of financial stressors and negative messages about their abilities and prospects.