



PARTNERSHIP FOR
Student Success



ENGAGING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN EVIDENCE-BASED ROLES

This brief was developed and published by the Partnership for Student Success, based at the Johns Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center.



High school students have immense potential not only to shape their own futures, but also to positively influence the academic, social, and emotional outcomes of their peers. As schools and communities seek innovative and sustainable strategies to address persistent challenges such as learning gaps, post-secondary readiness, and student well-being, engaging high school students in structured, evidence-based support roles—such as academic tutors, mentors, and post-secondary transition coaches—offers a powerful and underutilized solution.

This brief from the Partnership for Student Success at the Johns Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center highlights several models for how high school students can be meaningfully involved in support roles that foster success for both those giving and receiving support. Drawing on examples from across the country, we share five essential strategies to implement and sustain effective peer programming.

In addition to providing practical strategies, this brief includes real-world examples from the field that illustrate how schools and nonprofit organizations are successfully engaging high school students in roles supporting other K-12 students. The brief also offers some high-level suggestions to help schools, districts, and community-based organizations take the first steps toward designing and implementing peer-to-peer or near-peer models.

The Opportunity

High school students are uniquely positioned to support and guide peers, those the same or similar age (often referred to as peer-to-peer), or younger peers (also known as near-peer). Students can foster a sense of connection to school or community, enhancing academic readiness, supporting personal development challenges, and building pathways to post-secondary success. Through peer-to-peer or near-peer models, students are close in age to those they support, making them relatable role models who can provide advice and encouragement from their lived experiences. For students who may not feel comfortable asking an adult for help directly, their peers connect them to the right adults for guidance and resources. A well-designed program provides younger students with essential academic and social support, while older peers gain valuable community engagement experiences, build leadership capacity, and explore career pathways.

As chronic absenteeism increases, the need for a systematic approach to increasing student engagement in their schools and communities is critical. High school student supports can be an important element of a district's approach to help students find connection, making school feel more welcoming, and encouraging their regular attendance.



With about 8 million U.S. high school juniors and seniors each year, well-trained and supervised students can be trusted supports to their younger peers while potentially gaining service hours or dual credit in addition to valuable experience that can help prepare them for jobs after graduation. In addition, many of these programs can be low-cost, giving younger students a chance to openly communicate about their needs with peers who share similar backgrounds without financial burden.

Here are five essential strategies to effectively foster a culture where students support one another and prepare together for future success.

1. Utilize Evidence-Based Supports

Make sure that when choosing an intervention, there is evidence or research indicating that this type of intervention can have a strong, positive impact on students. Evidence-based student support roles can result in reading and math gains, graduation rates (high school and college), reductions in chronic absenteeism, and improved student well-being and mental health. Providing opportunities for high school students to serve in roles such as mentors, post-secondary coaches, academic tutors, etc. provides more people-powered supports to the students who need it.

2. Engage & Empower Students

Actively involve young people in identifying challenges they face in school and life—and give them meaningful opportunities to contribute to the solutions. Create safe spaces for youth to share their experiences, concerns, and ideas about what helps or hinders their success. Ultimately, this means shifting from doing things for students to doing things with students—making them active partners in building a school culture where everyone can thrive.

Example from the Field:

Indio High School, in Desert Sands Unified School District in California organized the [Coachella Valley Leadership Team \(CVLT\)](#), which expands student leadership potential and voice on various civic groups. Through this program, student advisors serve as mentors to increase student voice, culminating each year in a June leadership training, led by students, for students. The near peer pilot now serves as a model to neighboring high schools for what is possible when students lead and support younger peers to find leadership opportunities to connect to their high school experience, as early as 9th grade.



Example from the Field:

With students at the helm, DC Public Schools' [H.D. Woodson High School Attendance Pep Squad](#) provides peer mentoring efforts to combat chronic absenteeism and support a greater sense of belonging. Beginning as a pilot during the 2024-25 school year, ten students formed a pep squad to mentor peers and to create ways to support a more positive and welcoming culture of attendance at their high school. Both attendance and achievement have seen positive results.

3. Pilot Before Scaling

Start small with a focused group to test logistics, refine training, and gather feedback. Use early insights to improve the model before expanding the program schoolwide or districtwide.

Example from the Field:

[Girls Inc. of Chicago](#) recently piloted an intensive spring break “train-the-trainer” programs for high school students who supported their younger 8th grade peers as health facilitators. Their research-based programming focuses on the development of the whole girl, mentoring, and guiding girls in an affirmative pro-girl environment.

With support from case managers, older peers are role models and encouraged to be female leaders in their community.



4. Design Programs Intentionally

Set clear goals aligned to the broader school/district improvement priorities. Gather student and broader stakeholder feedback on the goals and program design. Creating something in isolation may mean resources are stretched and even the most high-quality programs may need to be postponed. Avoid this by examining data and utilizing community partnerships that build on the goals already established.

Example from the Field:

Peers can also guide younger students through key transitions, such as starting middle school or high school, or college and career readiness by helping them adjust to new routines and expectations, and possibly planning for post-secondary goals. The City University of New York's [College Access Research & Action or CARA](#) program is one example which utilizes peers to support first generation high school students as they explore their post-secondary options. Bridge Coaches receive extensive training and support. Ongoing evaluations ensure seamless program design and implementation across the 35 sites serving 3,000 students.

Example from the Field:

At [Read Alliance](#), the nonprofit's evidence-based tutoring program provides individual phonics intervention during out of school time for Kindergarten, first and second graders who are at least a half a grade level behind in reading. Lead educators remain onsite to support the ongoing training and support of the tutors, called Teen Leaders, who are students attending local high schools. Teen Leaders are placed in elementary schools located in their community, and are trained and paid to provide structured one-on-one phonics intervention to their younger peers from the same community, often with shared life experiences. With an intentional program design in place, the Teen Leaders are also eligible to participate in career connected learning opportunities, ensuring continued growth and providing pathways to interested Teen Leaders including a pipeline to teaching careers.



5. Encourage Mutual Growth

Create opportunities such as course alignment, service hours, or leadership credits to incentivize participation. This approach ensures the program is enriching and rewarding for both high school mentors and their younger peers. Utilize opportunities that encourage efficiency and, when possible, integrate the operating elements into existing structures. For example, if service hours are already a graduation requirement, then it is most efficient to include this opportunity in the approved options students already select from to complete this requirement. The benefit of young people earning a paycheck while working in a safe and meaningful job, especially in low-income, high needs communities, is a dual impact/win-win scenario and a smart investment.

Example from the Field:

The [Wellness Youth Advocate \(WYA\) program](#), led by the Los Angeles Trust for Children's Health, empowers high school students to promote health, wellness, and advocacy across 13 LAUSD [wellness centers located on school campuses](#). Each site supports 8–12 youth advocates who work closely with wellness center staff to build awareness of health resources available to students. WYAs participate in weekly after-school meetings where they engage in a structured curriculum covering topics like mental health, navigating support systems, and community asset mapping.

Each month, WYAs host lunch-time tabling events to share what they've learned, raise awareness about wellness services, and connect peers to support. These events not only inform students but also help WYAs strengthen skills in peer engagement, leadership, and advocacy. Through this hands-on experience, WYAs develop confidence, voice, and a sense of purpose, while adult allies help ensure their insights inform school practices. The program fosters a culture where youth are seen, heard, and supported as they grow into leaders within their schools and communities. You can hear from two former advocates in this [LAUSD podcast](#) released during the 2024-25 school year.



Getting Started

Launching a successful program requires careful planning, clear goals, and a strong foundation to ensure meaningful outcomes for both high school students and their peers. Whether you aim to improve academic performance, improve student engagement, build school connectedness, or increase postsecondary readiness, setting up the program with intention is key. The following list outlines some essential steps to help schools, districts, and organizations get started. This list is not exhaustive. For more information on strategies for implementing successful peer-support or near-peer support models, learn more from the resources at the end of this brief.

Define Goals & Scope

- Identify the specific needs the program will address (e.g., improving academic performance, easing school transitions, reducing absenteeism) and set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals.
- Decide the age range and number of students being supported and the number of students providing supports (e.g., mentees and mentors).
- Gather feedback and input from youth and other key stakeholders.
- Consider beginning with a pilot to learn what works best for your students before scaling. A pilot could take place during the summer, a school break, or with a small group of students.

Program Design

- Determine the structure of the program (e.g., one-on-one mentoring, group sessions, after-school clubs).
- Set a regular schedule for meetings and activities, including opportunities to set expectations with partner organizations and monitor progress.
- Establish structures and protocols for ongoing support and supervision.
- Assign staff members to lead training, oversee sessions, offer support, and track progress.
- Schedule check-ins and opportunities for high school students to reflect on their experiences and receive feedback.



Recruit, Train & Match

- Select high school students through an application process that considers maturity, communication skills, and interest in helping others.
- Provide training on the academic content if relevant, mentorship roles, session content, confidentiality, professionalism, behavior management, communication, data collection, and crisis referral protocols. The Partnership for Student Success can provide examples of these and have [curated many](#) as well.
- Pair students based on shared interests, goals, or backgrounds to foster strong connections.

Evaluate & Improve the Program

- Collect feedback from mentors, mentees, and staff.
- Use data to assess impact and make adjustments for improvement.

Additional Resources

This list will continue to be updated throughout the 2025-26 school year.

- [Establishing Partnerships: District Engagement Best Practices](#)
- [District Partnership Toolkit](#)
- [Child Health & Development Institute's Issue Brief 90 \(Students Helping Students\)](#)
- [Peer-to-Peer Mental Health](#)
- [A Structure for Peer Academic Support in High School Classes](#)
- [10 Practical Principles for Peer Supports](#)

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Connect with Us

PSS works to bring evidence-based and people-powered support to all students by:

- **Creating enabling conditions** for local collaboration between districts, nonprofits, higher education, and state/local government to provide all students with the supports they need to succeed.
 - **Leading strategic efforts** to engage specific populations—such as older adults, college students, high school students, AmeriCorps members, etc.—in jobs, volunteer roles, and career-connected learning opportunities providing P-12 students with evidence-based supports.
 - **Organizing solutions networks and working groups** to address pervasive challenges facing students and facilitate collaboration, information sharing, and learning between practitioners.
 - **Providing technical assistance and networking support** to schools, districts, nonprofits, and state/local government to support implementation.
 - **Developing publicly available tools and resources** to aid the implementation of evidence-based student supports.
 - **Conducting research** on the use and reach of evidence-based and people-powered student supports.
- [Connect with us to collaborate.](#)



Join Our Coalition

- [Join our coalition](#) of nonprofits, higher education institutions, and school districts working to enable all students to get the evidence-based supports they need to succeed.



Get Support

- The Partnership offers no-cost support to schools, districts, nonprofits, higher education institutions, and state/local government agencies working to implement, expand, or improve tutoring, mentoring, student success coaching, postsecondary transition coaching, or wraparound/integrated supports for K-12 students. We offer:
 - **Thought partnership, strategy consultation, and partnership development support** for programs seeking to start, expand, or improve
 - **Peer support networks** through working groups and solutions networks
 - **Webinars and events** to uplift timely research and promising practices
 - **Practical toolkits and training materials** for practitioners



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