Research Brief

Empowering Leaders in Education

Leadership Development in K-12 Drives Student Postsecondary Readiness

Kayla Ritter Rickels, Ed.D

Rachel Martin, Ph.D.

John Boumgarden, Ed.D.

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Executive Summary

Committing to leadership development is a long-term strategy that positively impacts students and their postsecondary outcomes

Following the expiration of pandemic related funds, many school districts nationwide face critical budgetary constraints. However, budget restrictions are not new, and often leave K–12 educational leaders navigating the tension between allocating dollars to programs that directly impact students (e.g., new curriculum) and considering investments in indirect services like leadership development. This research brief explores these budget tensions and argues that, despite financial challenges, committing to leadership development is a long-term strategy that positively impacts students and their postsecondary outcomes. Acknowledging the competing demands that exist, we examine the symbiotic relationship between effective leadership and student outcomes, offering a framework for high-quality leadership development that supports districts in

making meaningful change. Rooted in that framework, we assert that funding leadership development across a system leads to equitable outcomes for students. When leaders build their knowledge, skills, and abilities around postsecondary readiness, develop their self-efficacy to implement improvement efforts, and focus on continuously improving their systems and structures with graceful accountability, all students and the communities they exist within are set up to thrive. This research brief launches a nuanced conversation about the tensions inherent in school district resource allocation, advocating for a balance between addressing immediate student needs through short-term interventions and cultivating positive postsecondary readiness cultures through long-term systemic shifts and intentional leadership development.

The budget dilemma facing K–12 leaders underscores the need for strategic and nuanced approaches to resource allocation. This research brief calls on prior literature to argue that high–quality professional development for leaders specifically related to postsecondary readiness is a worthy investment.

Further, we provide a high quality professional development framework that supports districts in making meaningful change.

Research Brief
Introduction

K–12 leaders are tasked with navigating the complexities of educational administration, and the current landscape presents additional challenges. Leaders find themselves at a critical juncture, grappling with budget dilemmas exacerbated by the looming expiration of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. Just four years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a historic injection of public funds into the education system that catalyzed and financially bolstered new efforts to support students and families in an unprecedented public health crisis. However, as these funds expire educators face a funding cliff that threatens to undermine the progress made in addressing students' learning and social-emotional needs.

While there is a timely squeeze of funds with the impending expiration of ESSER, the underlying budget dilemmas are not new. The current context reflects the persistent challenge of resource allocation in education: There is never enough money, and there is rarely agreement on how to spend it. Often, leaders advocate for spending their limited funding on direct impact investments, which usually occur at the student level and directly influence student outcomes. Such investments may include curriculum overhauls, high-dosage tutoring, and hiring counselors and social workers to improve students' mental health and create a more holistic social-emotional learning environment. In contrast, indirect

impact investments typically have a layer of separation from direct student impact (e.g., infrastructure overhauls or professional development for district and school leaders). Indirect investments are often seen as secondary to dollars that directly impact student academic achievement, assuming that such direct spending has a higher return on investment for improving student outcomes. However, indirect investments also play a critical role in ensuring students have the necessary resources and opportunities for success.

School Leaders Play Pivotal Roles

One example of indirect investment with the potential for high impact and substantial return on investment is funding high-quality professional development for educational leaders. A comprehensive overview of leadership development in the K–12 sector reveals the pivotal role that effective leadership plays in shaping student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004). The literature underscores the significance of strong leadership in driving academic achievement (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012), fostering a positive school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2016), promoting college and career readiness standards (Cawn et al., 2016), and advancing equitable opportunities for all students (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). Indeed, the efficacy of K–12 leadership is intricately linked to student success, making it imperative to prioritize investments in high-quality leadership development programs (Tingle et al., 2019). Empowering educational leaders with the skills and resources to navigate the complexities of persistently challenging budgetary landscapes makes it possible to effect meaningful change and drive positive student outcomes.

Promoting Postsecondary Readiness

One responsibility of educational leaders that deserves more attention is the promotion of postsecondary readiness among K–12 students, particularly those from underserved communities. Investing in leadership development geared specifically towards enhancing postsecondary readiness initiatives can serve as a potent tool for closing equity gaps in postsecondary outcomes (e.g., Causey et al., 2023). In particular, K–12 leaders have the opportunity and responsibility to address the pervasive economic and racial/ethnic disparities in college enrollment, persistence, and completion exacerbated by policy challenges such as the 2023-24 FAFSA rollout and the continued financial burden of higher education. By equipping educational leaders with the knowledge and skills to implement effective college and career readiness programs, schools can remove barriers and provide students with the resources they need to attain their highest postsecondary aspirations.

Developing
Educational Leaders

Creating and sustaining the conditions for student success

Teachers are often the subject of professional learning and development in education, which is justified considering their proximity to student learning. However, a growing body of research demonstrates that the strength of school leaders, especially principals, is associated with gains in student outcomes, including academic performance, attendance, college enrollment, and postsecondary persistence (Hanushek et al., 2024; Rivkin et al., 2023). For example, synthesizing results from six longitudinal studies that examined principal effects on students' math and reading standardized test scores, Grissom et al. (2021) found that "the size of principal effects is nearly as large as estimates of individual teacher effects on student learning" (p. 39), mainly due to "their efforts to recruit, develop, support, and retain a talented teaching staff and create conditions for them to deliver strong instruction" (p. 40). Indeed, principals and other school leaders are tasked with creating and sustaining the systems and conditions that are necessary for students to succeed.

The Postsecondary Transition

Over the last several years, states have increased their focus on ensuring students are prepared for life after high school by introducing college and career readiness standards (Cawn et al., 2016). Although this preparation focuses on ensuring students are learning and developing the necessary knowledge and skills to successfully transition into their postsecondary pathways (Malin & Hackmann, 2017), it also includes providing students with resources, opportunities, and experiences that will prepare them for college and career (e.g., increasing access to advanced coursework, introducing career pathway models).

Principals Make an Impact

Research suggests that principals may be key in promoting postsecondary success among students. For example, in a study of middle school principals, Rivkin et al. (2023) found that these individuals had a long-term impact on students' college matriculation and employment. Providing insight into how exactly school leaders might make this impact, Malin & Hackmann (2017) conducted an in-depth examination of two high school principals and their work to advance college and

When school leaders are strong, they can create positive school climates and cultures. Investing in the development of school leaders may lead to a higher return on investment for districts.

career readiness in their schools, finding that these leaders called upon several strategies to develop career pathways, including leading the development of a shared vision, developing relational trust, maintaining focus on learning, forming successful partnerships, creating structures for collaboration and leadership distribution, and developing teachers' leadership capacity. Although, principals are not the individuals responsible for directly delivering instruction; instead, they focus on building the conditions for teacher – and, therefore, student success.

Building a Strong School Culture

When school leaders are strong, they can create positive school climates and cultures (Rivkin et al., 2023; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). However, principals, like teachers, likely benefit from job-specific training and professional development that builds their capacity to implement the strategies found to be successful by Malin & Hackmann (2017). Grissom et al.
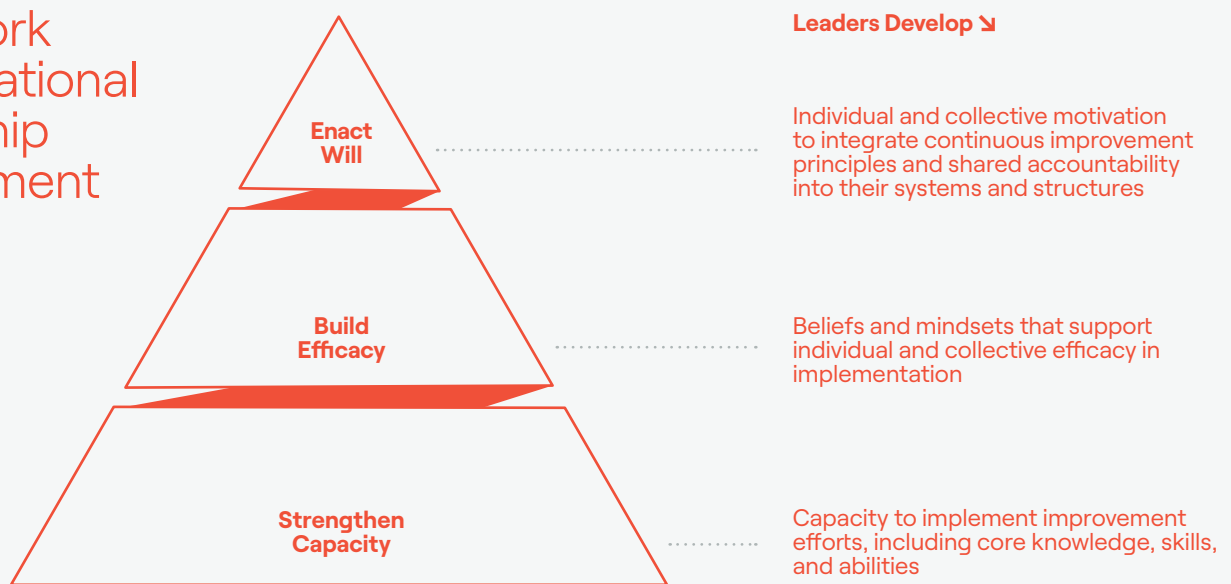
(2021) noted that principals need to be highly competent in three key skill areas: 1) instructional leadership (e.g., able to coach and develop teachers), 2) communication (with teachers, staff, parents, community members, etc.), and 3) organizational management. As most school leaders begin their careers as teachers, they may benefit from specific training to further develop these skills. Investing in the development of school leaders may lead to a high return on investment for districts, as "Principals really matter. Indeed, it is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership" (Grissom et al., 2021, p. xiv). In the following sections, we outline a framework for high-quality educational leadership development and provide an example of a program that works to build the capacity of school and district leaders to create the conditions and systems necessary for student success.

Framework
High-Quality Leadership Development

Figure 1

Framework *for* Educational Leadership Development

Leaders Develop ↘

Individual and collective motivation to integrate continuous improvement principles and shared accountability into their systems and structures

Beliefs and mindsets that support individual and collective efficacy in implementation

Capacity to implement improvement efforts, including core knowledge, skills, and abilities

As demonstrated above, high-quality leadership development is paramount for K-12 education leaders as they play a pivotal role in shaping the educational landscapes and fostering the growth of their communities (Tingle et al., 2019). Effective educational leadership demands a multifaceted skill set that cannot be static due to the ever-changing nature of the educational landscape. Instead, leaders must engage in continuous development throughout their careers. Yet, not all professional development and learning are of high quality (Green & Allen, 2015). Due to this reality, we propose a framework for high-quality educational leadership development to help administrations evaluate whether such indirect investments are an effective use of their limited resources. We offer a three-tiered framework for educational leadership development (Figure 1) that integrates theory with practical application, encourages individual and collective development, and empowers leaders to adapt to evolving educational landscapes.

Strengthen Capacity

First and foremost, foundational to this framework is the notion that a leader can drive educational improvement efforts. A leader's capacity to engage in this work requires developing knowledge, skills, and abilities related to their role and the context through which they lead (Day et al., 2009). It is important to note that capacity is contextual, and educational leaders often oversee a variety of domains; thus, leaders should thoughtfully consider the areas of their leadership responsibility that require development and align their learning to the area with the highest potential for sustained impact. This deliberate focus will enable leaders to prioritize growth opportunities and allocate resources effectively, equipping them with the tools required to address specific needs and challenges of their educational improvement efforts.

Build Efficacy

Building on this strengthened capacity, leaders must believe they can act on improvement efforts. Although action can occur without the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities, leaders must cultivate their self-efficacy, believing they can successfully apply their newly developed capacity (Dugan, 2017). With this framing in mind, we argue that embedding belief and mindset development to improve self and collective efficacy within leadership development catalyzes meaningful action toward sustained, equitable improvement.

Enact Will

Finally, leaders must have the desire and willpower to enact improvement efforts.

Often, we consider will to be synonymous with motivation. Chan and Drasgow (2001) outlined the three forms of leadership motivation. While it is useful to consider the type of motivation that brings a leader into the work, we argue the practice of will aligns with how leaders can embed continuous improvement and graceful accountability for themselves and others in their improvement efforts. Motivation may be the initial spark for will, yet it is the shared unwavering commitment to continuous improvement and accountability that fosters systemic change. Will encompasses the ethical commitment necessary to enact meaningful change in an ongoing way.

Collective Development

As a whole, this framework outlines the structured nature of effective educational leadership development. It is important to note that this framework can also be used in an iterative nature (see example in Figure 2). That is to say that an individual leader can leverage the framework to continuously assess their needs for growth and identify high-quality leadership development opportunities to refine their leadership over time. However, individuals cannot make sustained progress alone. Leaders must also engage as a collective in development. Collaborative engagement in leadership development fosters a culture of shared accountability while supporting individual growth efforts. It is through this collective efficacy that adaptive leaders are developed and positioned to drive effective and equitable change.

Leadership Network → Flow

Figure 2

Individual Leaders

if leaders develop strong postsecondary knowledge, skills and mindsets

⋯⋯→ **Collective Efficacy**

and commit to improving their postsecondary systems and structures together

⋯⋯→ **Systems Change**

then students will achieve more equitable outcomes

The presented framework underscores the interconnectedness of capacity, efficacy, and will within educational contexts. It is not enough that they are connected, they are developmentally linked when leadership development is high quality. The iterative nature of the framework emphasizes the ongoing process of self-assessment and collaborative engagement in systems change. In the subsequent section, we will provide an overview of a leadership development program that aligns with the principles outlined in this framework.

OneGoal's Postsecondary Model
High-Quality Leadership Development

Although the aim and focus of postsecondary readiness and success work is on students, it is adults—school and district leaders—who have the power to change the systems and cultures in which our students prepare themselves for life after high school.

OneGoal is a national nonprofit that envisions a future in which every student has an equitable opportunity to achieve their greatest postsecondary aspirations. OneGoal offers both direct and indirect solutions to school districts across the country. The direct impact solution is a classroom-based postsecondary preparation course that continues with remote support for students for a full year after high school graduation. Through this solution OneGoal helps schools and districts transform advising and close equity gaps. The indirect impact solution, known as OneGoal Leadership Network, is a three-year partnership that supports schools and districts in promoting equitable postsecondary outcomes for graduates. Guided by expert Postsecondary Leadership Coaches, partners assess the current state of their postsecondary systems and structures, collaboratively design an improvement plan tailored to their needs, and participate in a supportive community of practice with their peers. Ultimately, this work leads to postsecondary system transformation.

High-quality leadership development through executive coaching is the core component of the Leadership Network model. Although the aim and focus of postsecondary readiness and success work is on students, it is adults—school and district leaders—who have the power to change the systems and cultures in which our students prepare themselves for life
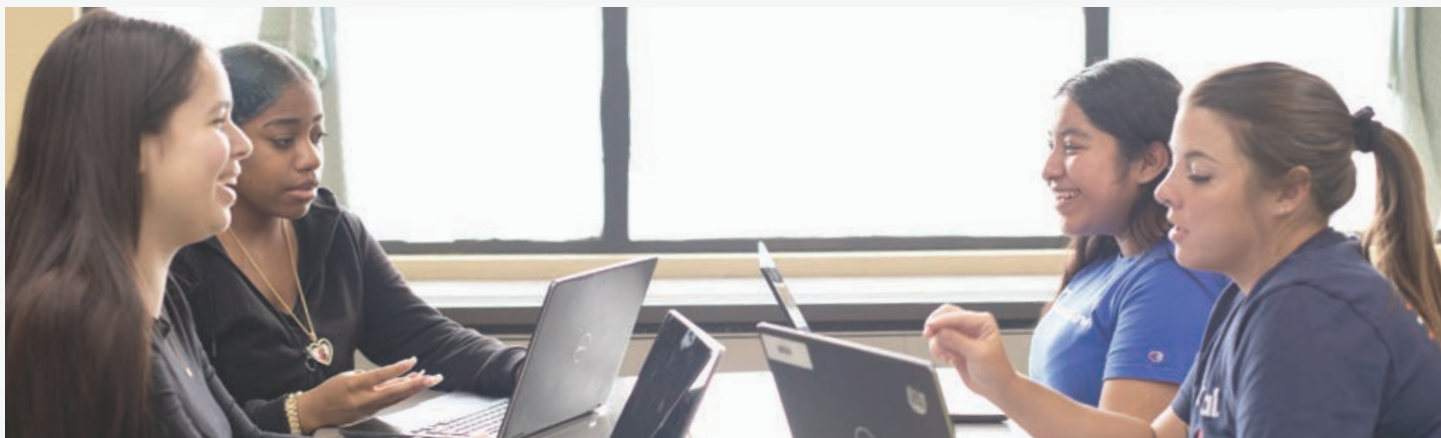
after high school. This work aligns with the proposed high-quality educational leadership development framework to support K–12 educational leaders in the specific context of postsecondary improvement.

The Leadership Network model is predicated on the idea that postsecondary improvement cannot be accomplished by a single individual. Rather, OneGoal brings teams of educational leaders together to form Postsecondary Leadership Teams (PLTs) and engage in collective development. PLTs are a type of cross-functional team, "a collection of persons with varying levels of experience who work together toward a shared objective to become more creative, inventive, and successful" (Don Ton et al., 2022, p. 179). These teams are often composed of district administrators, school administrators, counselors, and teacher leaders, all of whom collectively share and grow their knowledge related

to postsecondary issues and develop the skills and confidence necessary to implement improvement strategies. PLT members engage in individual and collective leadership development that empowers systemic change through the Leadership Network.

Strengthen Capacity

School and district leaders come to the table with varying knowledge of postsecondary readiness and success issues. Individuals' knowledge bases are likely influenced by their tenure in the field, the roles that they have held in the past, their current role, their personal postsecondary experiences, and their familiarity with the community's local context. Each member of a PLT brings valuable information that can increase the group's collective knowledge. Due to the necessity of bringing together a group of individuals with diverse experiences, a foundational part of the

Leadership Network is the formation of the PLT to engage in the work.

Following the formation of such a leadership team, the assigned Postsecondary Leadership Coach facilitates the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities that support postsecondary outcomes interrogation and improvement. Examples of this work include modeling new protocols for data analysis, examining exemplars for learning and replication opportunities, and supporting specific skill development by facilitating professional learning opportunities.

This process ideally leads to ideation related to postsecondary improvement. For example, once PLT members learn via a data analysis protocol (e.g., developing skills) that their students do not have many opportunities to receive advising specifically related to postsecondary planning (e.g., gaining knowledge about their district's current postsecondary efforts), they may naturally begin to brainstorm solutions or change ideas to try to increase the frequency and quality of these interactions. Next, leaders must believe they can act on this emergent knowledge, skills, and abilities to create change.

Build Efficacy

The Leadership Network moves beyond skills to focus on mindsets, including self- and collective efficacy. Postsecondary Leadership Coaches support teams in engaging in reflective practices and collaborative problem-solving to showcase the capabilities of the PLT members. This includes identifying and challenging existing assumptions and beliefs that may hinder progress. Through structured conversations, goal-setting, and applying evidence-based strategies, leaders learn to cultivate growth mindsets in themselves and their staff. This process creates a culture of trust and continuous improvement culture, where feedback is actively sought and valued. By modeling and promoting

Leadership Network supports the engagement of will through developing a skill set rooted in continuous improvement.

these practices, leaders inspire their teams to embrace change, take ownership of their professional growth, and work together towards common goals, ultimately enhancing the school's capacity to implement and sustain improvement efforts. This action not only takes efficacy and skills, but it also requires will.

Enact Will

The capstone to high-quality leadership development is focused at the system level. Building on initial and individual motivations, the Leadership Network supports enacting will by building a skill set rooted in continuous improvement. Continuous improvement refers to "the act of integrating quality improvement into the daily work of individuals in the system" (Park et al., 2013, p. 5). PLTs work to integrate the principles of continuous improvement into their regular practice, as well as spread both the mindset of continuous improvement (i.e., "we can and should always be open to improving our practice") and continuous

improvement strategies (e.g., Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles) into various departments across the district.

Embedded in continuous improvement is the need for graceful accountability. Accountability in education is typically tied to state accountability structures, daunting metrics that affect districts' funding and access to resources. However, we contend that both individuals and the system must 1) take accountability for their roles in students' postsecondary success and 2) do so with grace to encourage the development of a working environment in which individuals feel safe enough to take accountability and self-efficacious enough to pursue improvement and potentially fail. Creating this type of work environment falls on the educational leaders (PLT members), who are responsible for modeling these behaviors and creating systems and structures where staff feel empowered to take accountability and work toward change.

Research Brief
Conclusion

OneGoal Leadership Network embodies a comprehensive approach to postsecondary improvement, rooted in the belief that systemic change requires collective engagement, continuous growth, and accountable action at all levels of the educational ecosystem.

By convening Postsecondary Leadership Teams (PLTs) composed of diverse stakeholders, including district administrators, school leaders, counselors, and teacher leaders, the model fosters a collaborative environment where individuals collectively share knowledge, leverage their experiences, and ideate innovative strategies to advance postsecondary readiness and success for all students. Embracing a collective responsibility mindset, PLT members recognize each individual's integral role in shaping students' futures and commit to fulfilling their professional responsibilities with a shared sense of purpose and accountability. Moreover, by upholding high expectations for all students and cultivating a growth-oriented mindset among educators, the model empowers individuals to continuously enhance their capacity to support students' postsecondary aspirations, fostering a culture of excellence, equity, and inclusivity within educational communities. As PLTs integrate principles of continuous improvement and graceful accountability into their practice, they create a supportive environment where individuals feel empowered to take ownership of their roles in student success and work collaboratively toward meaningful and sustainable change. Through this holistic approach, the Leadership Network aligns with the components of high-quality educational leadership development and with OneGoal's overarching vision to ensure that every student has an equitable opportunity to achieve their greatest postsecondary aspirations.

# Research Brief
Call to Action

> In prioritizing leadership development, school districts can position their leaders to pave the way for improved student outcomes.

The K–12 landscape is marked by complex challenges and competing funding demands. As educational leaders navigate this critical juncture, adopting strategic and nuanced approaches to resource allocation is imperative. Specifically, we argue that school districts must design budgets that are inclusive of long-term investments in leadership development so leaders are positioned to lead equitable improvement efforts in their contexts. The framework offered in this research brief supports educational leaders in their evaluation of and approach to effective leadership development so that when resources are prioritized for such efforts, they are maximized to support the needs of individual leaders, the collective leadership group, the community, and ultimately, students. The challenges facing K–12 education demand innovative solutions and strategic investments. In prioritizing leadership development, school districts can position their leaders to pave the way for improved student outcomes.

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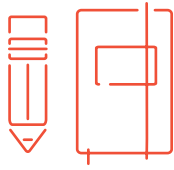
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Authors

Kayla Ritter Rickels, Ed.D.
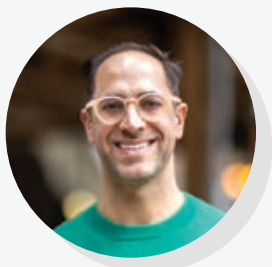Postsecondary Leadership Coach

Kayla Ritter Rickels serves as a Postsecondary Leadership Coach, working with district leaders across the commonwealth of Kentucky and state of Indiana. With a set of values rooted in the belief that education is liberation, she has dedicated her career to the creation of enabling conditions for equity in exploration, access, and attainment of a postsecondary credential. She began her career in college admissions and enrollment management and has moved through roles within college access non-profit, K12 school district, and ed tech organization spaces that allowed her to drive impact and system change with a keen focus on equity for historically marginalized and minoritized students. She earned her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Northern Kentucky University, her M.S. in Marketing from the University of Cincinnati, and her B.A. in Mathematics from Thomas More College.

Rachel Martin, Ph.D.
Senior Director of Program Learning

Rachel Martin serves as a Senior Director of Program Learning at OneGoal, collaborating with program leaders, designers, and practitioners to identify and engage in high-impact research and evaluation projects. Specifically, she aims to use strategies from the work of research-practice partnerships to disrupt traditional academic power dynamics, conducting research and creating resources and tools that are useful for practitioners in schools. For 10 years, she has worked in the college access and success space as an admission counselor, career coach, dual enrollment program coordinator, and researcher. Rachel holds a Ph.D. in Education from Washington University in St. Louis, an M.A. in Educational Psychology from The University of Texas at Austin, and a B.A. in Communication and Media Studies from Goucher College.

John Boumgarden, Ed.D.
Postsecondary Leadership Coach

John Boumgarden is a dynamic education leader committed to advancing equitable K-12 education systems and postsecondary success for all young people. He currently serves as a Senior Director and Postsecondary Leadership Coach supporting OneGoal's Leadership Network across the states of Illinois and Massachusetts. Prior to joining OneGoal, John worked with the Chicago nonprofit LEAP Innovations as an Instructional Coach and helped lead their education policy initiatives. He began his career in education with Teach For America and worked in a variety of school governance structures in St. Louis, New York City, and Baltimore. He holds an Ed.D. in K-12 Education Leadership and Policy from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, an M.S. in Education from Hunter College, and a B.S. in Political Science and Sociology from Calvin University.

OneGoal transforms postsecondary advising and support so that every student can define their own future. Together with our partners, we're building a movement to close the opportunity gap. We work side-by-side with partner schools and districts to build their knowledge and capacity. The result is more equitable and effective support for all students. Our unique approach, honed over 15 years, prioritizes strong human relationships. And it's proven to deliver real student impact. Nationally, 82% of OneGoal high school graduates enroll in a postsecondary institution, and 73% of those who enroll persist one year after high school. An independent study by the University of Chicago found that OneGoal students are about 40% more likely to earn their postsecondary degrees than students from similar backgrounds.