PEER-TO-PEER ROUNDTABLE

February 4, 2026 | Synthesis Document with Enhanced Data & Citations

ROUNDTABLE DEBRIEF & STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

On February 4, 2026, educational leaders representing institutions from 400 to 30,000+ students convened to address a crisis more urgent than enrollment statistics: **students aren't rejecting education; they're rejecting irrelevance**.

Doug Key (Head of School, York Country Day School) captured the moment: *"Kids today are losing faith in what their pathways are to their next step. This is a fundamental shift in our workforce that schools simply don't adapt to quickly enough."*

This roundtable moved beyond diagnosis to deployment. Participants shared operational frameworks already working—models eliminating $150,000+ in student costs, achieving 92% retention rates, and placing 800 students into positions earning $15.5 million collectively. These leaders have chosen to **build what students need rather than defend what institutions want**.

Participating Institutions: K-12 Public (Lansing SD 158 IL, New Castle County Vo-Tech DE, Glassboro PS NJ, Surry County Schools VA) | Independent Schools (York Country Day School PA) | Community Colleges (Dallas College North Lake TX, Maricopa CC AZ) | Universities (Albizu University Miami FL, Athens State University AL)

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT: FORCES RESHAPING AMERICAN EDUCATION

The Central Challenge

American education confronts a convergence of demographic, technological, and market forces that will fundamentally reshape how we serve learners over the next decade. The data is unambiguous: 1.7 million students lost in higher education since 2014. 1.2 million departed K-12 since 2019. Combined, this represents a student population equivalent to New Mexico—students who have not disappeared but rather opted for alternative pathways.

The Enrollment Crisis: Quantifying the Challenge

Higher Education Context:

- 1.7 million students lost since 2014 peak enrollment (20.6 million, fall 2010)

- 8.3% overall decline from peak; community colleges experiencing disproportionate impact (37% decline since 2010)

- Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024

K-12 Context:

- 1.2 million students lost since 2019

- First sustained multi-year decline in public school enrollment since the 1970s

- Driven by declining birth rates and migration to alternative education models

- Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2024

Institutional Viability:

- 28 college closures in first nine months of 2024

- Average closure impact: 265 jobs eliminated, $14 million in local economic activity lost

- Federal Reserve projection: 80 additional higher education closures by 2029

- Sources: Inside Higher Ed College Closure Tracker; Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2024

Demographic Projections: Regional Variation Demands Differentiated Strategy

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) 2024 Projections:

National High School Graduate Trends:

- Peak graduation: 3.9 million students (2025)

- Projected decline 2025-2030: -7.4% (287,000 fewer graduates)

- Projected decline 2030-2039: Additional -9% (330,000 fewer graduates)

Regional Disparities:

- Northeast: -20% by 2039 (most severe impact)

- Midwest: -8% by 2039

- West: -17% by 2039

- South: +3% by 2039 (sole growth region)

Strategic Implication: Institutions in the Northeast and Western regions face existential enrollment pressure requiring fundamental business model transformation. Southern institutions face intensified competition for limited growth. Geographic context must inform institutional strategy; universal approaches will prove inadequate to regional realities.

The Alternative Education Ecosystem: Market Validation of Unmet Needs

E-Learning Market Growth:

- 2025 global market valuation: $248.84 billion

- Projected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) 2025-2030: 14.2%

- Source: Mordor Intelligence, 2025

School Choice Expansion:

- Students utilizing choice options: 1+ million across 34 states (2024-25 academic year)

- Year-over-year growth rate: 23%

- Source: EdChoice, 2025

Homeschool Growth:

- Current enrollment: 3.7 million students (6.7% of K-12 population)

- Growth since 2019-20: 51%

- Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, 2024

Market Interpretation: Students and families are not rejecting education—they are rejecting traditional educational delivery models that no longer align with their needs, values, or economic realities. The proliferation of alternatives represents market validation that institutional education has failed to adapt at the pace required by changing demographics, technology, and economic conditions.

Traditional institutions face a fundamental choice: evolve delivery models to meet demonstrated market demand or continue defending structures the market has already rejected.

The Fundamental Question

Are we designing systems to defend institutional structures we've inherited, or building pathways to serve the students and communities who depend upon us?

The leaders in this roundtable have chosen the latter. This brief synthesizes their insights, challenges, and emerging strategies for navigating disruption while strengthening educational opportunity.

THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE: FROM DISILLUSIONMENT TO RELEVANCE

The Trust Crisis Quantified

Dr. Joe Hill introduced the "Uber Driver Metric"—a diagnostic more revealing than any enrollment data: *"I'll talk to the Uber driver near a campus, and they say: 'Yeah, I started here, but I just kind of washed out. Nobody really seemed to know who I was. They didn't seem to have much of a direction for me. I didn't have money to waste. So here I am driving you, sir.'"*

Dr. Joseph Jones (Superintendent, New Castle County Vocational-Technical School District) reframed the issue precisely: *"When we discuss students losing trust, I'd say it's really **disillusionment**. The relevance factor is huge. We're not just competing with other schools—we're competing with social media, with different pathways students see as more aligned to their reality."*

The data validates this disillusionment: New Castle County's 800 working students earned $15.5 million last year while maintaining a 98% graduation rate. These students haven't abandoned education—they've found relevance through integration of learning and earning. As Dr. Hill observed: *"I bet Dr. Jones has more glitzy cars in his lot than just the regular high school, cause the students are working, they're making money. Four years out, they're pulling trailers that have toys on the back end."*

THREE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORKS: BUILDING COHERENT PATHWAYS

Framework 1: Eliminating the "Or" Between Pathways

The 3E Model (Dr. Herbert Monroe, Surry County Schools VA): Every student graduates with one of three destinations **guaranteed**—Enrolled, Enlisted, or Employed in career-track positions.

Dr. Monroe's insight reveals the barrier: *"We got kids that graduated working at Newport News Shipyard making $70,000 a year, and they're going to go to college. I call it 'earn while you learn.' But where we sometimes lose is not educating the parents. There are barriers like transportation and master schedules. I think we need to get rid of all of this policy and regulations and **let kids do what they're passionate about, because they can get the learning through their passion.**"*

The Glassboro Pathway Model (Dr. Al Lewis, Superintendent, Glassboro Public Schools, NJ): Partnership with Rowan University creates comprehensive academies where *"every child in Glassboro is going to have a coherent, apparent pathway to them, whatever they wish to pursue."*

Dr. Lewis, a first-generation college student, articulated the institutional failure: *"My mom was zero help when it came to going to college. I had no clue what I wanted to do, what my aptitude was. Upon my appointment, I heard that we're really only meeting the needs of our highest flyers. D-1 athlete? We'll roll out the red carpet. Ivy League scholar? Red carpet. But essentially for everybody else, the district hasn't done an adequate job."*

The solution requires institutional humility. As Dr. Lewis stated: *"**That's where the district has to come in in loco parentis** and say: 'Here's what you're good at. Here's what you're interested in. Here's what you could do. Now let's help you prepare for that and connect you to the right people.'"*

Framework 2: Barrier Busting as Institutional Philosophy

The Dallas College Model (Dr. Rick Smith, President, Dallas College North Lake Campus): A system serving 30,000 dual credit students across seven campuses describes itself as being in the *"**barrier-busting business**."*

Dr. Smith's framework is comprehensive: *"We provide food banks, rail system access, clothing*

closets, and childcare. ***We try to remove all barriers to make the transition as easy as possible.*** *One of the things I think is so neat about the community college space is* ***we meet students where they are****—either educationally or personally, whatever they've got going on."*

The strategic innovation lies in **Next Gen Sector Partnerships**—industry-led collaborations where higher education, K-12, government, and nonprofits *"work together but it's industry-led, removing barriers for folks to find a pathway."* Each college president assumes leadership of specific workforce sectors (aerospace, biotech, construction, health, IT, and manufacturing) aligned with regional demand.

Most significantly, Dallas College functions as a convener, not a competitor: *"**We're inviting other colleges**—other two-year and four-year—**to participate in this program** because there may be some programs students are interested in that we don't offer, but we know the institution down the street does. **So, we're sending them there.** It's not about just driving our enrollment—it's about identifying meaningful, paying jobs and training pathways."*

Dr. Hill synthesized: *"Rick, you represent an entire system that is built as invisible heroes. Some of them are as simple as: 'You've got an interview? We got you.' **Just eliminating friction. Taking the 'no' out of every conversation with a student**—isn't that what it's all about?"*

Framework 3: Credential Stacking for Employment

The Delaware Model (Dr. Joseph Jones, New Castle County Vocational-Technical): Operating four comprehensive high schools with 40 career programs and 1,200+ apprentices, Dr. Jones designed a "four-legged stool" where *"a diploma for our students is a must, but we ensure their hands-on experience and involvement in learning **is not passive**."*

The credential stacking approach is strategic: *"If you go through our teacher academy: early childhood cert (state requires) + CDA (national assessment) + **para-pro certification**. So, if they pursue anything beyond that, they could go into a school system **as a para-professional rather than just a substitute.** We're always thinking about graduation: **How do we remove those barriers?"***

The structural innovation—the "two-week-about"—alternates students between job sites and classroom every two weeks throughout the school year, maintaining employer continuity while ensuring academic completion. Dr. Jones explained: *"Out of 1,100 students last year, **800 worked, earning about $15.5 million collectively.** That hands-on co-op aligns to us wanting*

*them to **think critically, work under pressure**. And really, **if they fail, they know how to get back up now**—and that's when it can happen, cause **all the supports are still surrounding them.***"

On active learning, Dr. Jones challenged conventional practice: *"There's no reason a student has to write five essays in one marking period to get to a better essay. It should be **one essay written five times, and it should be ready for publication at the end.** AI and Google are changing this. Relevance for kids in 2026 is everything."*

The dual enrollment ROI: Over $150,000 saved for students last year while maintaining a 98% graduation rate across three Title I, minority-majority schools.

CROSS-CUTTING INSIGHTS: FROM COMPETITION TO COLLABORATION

The Ecosystem Imperative

Dr. Yianni Vassiliou (Chancellor, Albizu University Miami) reframed the fundamental challenge: *"Students don't come to our institutions—whether high school, college, or university—**to get a piece of paper and decorate their walls. They come to learn the skills and get a job using them.** Typically, we see ourselves pointing fingers at each other—K-12 doesn't prepare students to be college-ready for what we perceive as college-ready in higher ed. **We have to see things a lot differently.** Having academy-focused high schools allows seamless transition **without pointing fingers at each other**."*

His three critical questions frame strategic planning:

1. **Demand Assessment**: *"Are there enough jobs for the programs we offer and the graduates we will produce in our regions?"*

2. **Institutional Focus**: *"We realize **we cannot be everything to everyone.** What are we doing best? What are we known for best? How can those be embedded in programs that drive students to **jobs of the future, not today?**"*

3. **Abundance Mindset**: *"**If we do our assessments individually, there is enough for everyone.** That requires all of us **coming together, not competing against each other but collaborating and supplementing each other**, having the student's best interest in mind."*

Structural Barriers to Coherence

Dr. Nathan Schilling (Superintendent, Lansing SD 158 IL) identified systemic disconnection: *"In Illinois, many districts are either PreK-8 or 9-12 high school-only. So you, by nature, **create another transition point organizationally** - different board policies, procedures, staffing, mission, and vision. It creates this natural kind of breaking point right when students need continuity most."*

Dr. Al Lewis connected this to higher education: *"It's the same thing for higher education. You're trying to accommodate all these different K-12 districts, each structured and preparing kids differently. There are disconnects that happen just by the nature of how districts are structured."*

The solution requires deliberate pathway design across institutional boundaries—what Dr. Lewis calls ensuring *"every student has a coherent, apparent pathway"* regardless of destination.

The Affordability Imperative

Dr. Catherine Wehlburg (President, Athens State University, AL) stated what others avoid: *"We're not talking about **student debt loads**—and that's something that's keeping a lot of students from even looking at a post-secondary pathway. If they're going to go into a job paying $55,000-$60,000 a year and owe $150,000 in debt, **that's not going to work. That's not a good return on that literal investment.**"*

The resource reality: *"States are spending less on higher ed. In Alabama, they want to put more money in K-12—**and I can't argue with that**. But that means it's at the expense of higher ed, and we've got to figure out how to address that. The reality is a university is a business, just in the business of education. **We've got to keep the doors open.**"*

This funding pressure makes cross-sector collaboration not aspirational but essential for survival.

Private School Integration

The roundtable's inclusion of York Country Day School marked a significant evolution. **Doug Key** acknowledged, *"**I think we get in private schools, we get very parochial and just see our world.** Thank you for sharing that."*

Matthew Jones (Head of Lower School, York Country Day) expressed the validation independent educators rarely receive: *"I appreciate it cause a lot of times I feel like the little guy is left*

out of it. I'm always telling my teachers: **Think about those doctors and lawyers out there—you taught them the building blocks of everything they know.** *It validates what you're doing even at the private little system."*

Key's closing captured shared purpose across sectors: *"We're a school of 400 kids.* **We're all just trying to reverse what this industrial complex has done wrongly to our communities and our systems.** *That's why I wake up. We've got to keep swinging."*

LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVES: ACTIONABLE FRAMEWORKS

1. The Guaranteed Destination Audit

Implement Virginia's 3E Model by documenting every graduating senior's confirmed post-graduation status:

- **Enrolled**: Acceptance + financial plan + registration completed

- **Enlisted**: Service commitment signed

- **Employed**: Career-track offer letter ($40K+ annually)

Standard: Below 80% indicates structural gaps; below 50% represents system failure.

Barrier Removal: Eliminate gaps in parent education, transportation obstacles, master schedule rigidity, and policies that prevent students from pursuing demonstrated passions.

2. The Relevance Recovery Protocol

Week 1: Shadow 20 students for full days, tracking time across passive consumption, active production, real-world connection, and wasted time.

Week 2: Pilot Dr. Joseph Jones's challenge—one essay written five times until publication-ready, submitted to actual publications.

Weeks 3-4: Test Delaware's "two-week-about" model with five students, three employer partners, alternating job site and classroom every two weeks.

Success Metrics: 73% employment rate, $19,375 average earnings per working student, 98% graduation rate maintained.

Employment Impact Test: Can students get hired immediately? What's the entry salary? How many local employers recognize it? Does it stack toward the next certification?

If answers are No / <\$15/hour / <5 employers / No: Redesign immediately.

4. Cross-Sector Pathway Mapping

Week 1: Map all regional educational providers—K-12 districts, community colleges, four-year institutions, technical schools, apprenticeship programs.

Weeks 2-3: Schedule dean/president-level meetings identifying 3-5 priority career pathways for deep partnership. Draft MOUs specifying credit transfer, dual enrollment, financial arrangements, advising protocols.

Week 4: Draft non-competition agreements stating primary goal is regional student success, not individual enrollment, with shared metrics on employment rates, completion rates, debt loads.

5. The "No" Elimination Audit

Map every barrier in the student journey: basic needs (food, housing, transportation, childcare), financial (tuition, fees, textbooks, technology), academic (advising, tutoring, mental health), and structural (schedules, requirements, policies).

For each barrier, calculate: What would elimination cost? What's the cost of NOT eliminating it? Which community partners could help at reduced/zero cost?

90-Day Sprint: Month 1—identify top 10 barriers; Month 2—pilot three solutions; Month 3—scale and eliminate three barriers permanently.

SYNTHESIS: THE CHOICE BEFORE US

Dr. Joseph Jones articulated the urgency every leader feels: "*I really feel reaffirmed. A lot of us, regardless of our area of focus—higher ed or K-12—whether stackable credentials, meaningful learning, or getting kids fully engaged, I heard that. The big question for us is:* **How do we do this at scale?** *We talked about how school systems are slow-moving barges.* **How can we pivot faster and make some of this work, so we don't keep losing those students?** *The market is not waiting for any of us—it's moving whether we want it to or not.*"

Doug Key named the fear: "My greatest fear is we can put programs in place, but if the destination is one we don't even know exists yet, it's hard to make decisions year to year knowing what's

what's right."

Yet the roundtable revealed a path forward. These leaders have chosen ecosystem thinking over institutional optimization, collaboration over competition, and student outcomes over enrollment metrics. They eliminate barriers rather than defending them. They build coherent pathways rather than defending fragmented systems. They measure success by student employment and completion rather than institutional revenue and prestige.

Dr. Vassiliou's abundance mindset offers the strategic foundation: *"**If we do our assessments individually, there is enough for everyone**. That requires all of us coming together, not competing against each other but collaborating and supplementing each other."*

The question for every educational leader: Will you join them in building—or continue defending?

Students deserve coherence. Communities deserve collaboration. The market is not waiting.

Next Roundtable: April 2026 | **Application:**

https://www.higherperformancegroup.com/p2p-page

For additional resources: www.higherperformancegroup.com

"The market is not waiting for any of us. It's moving whether we want it to or not. Students deserve coherence. Every community deserves to be served by a really healthy team that you're helping to build on the inside, but also a highly reliable system that benefits all." — **Dr. Joe Hill**