



## How ACS Helped a School District Prepare Students for the Workforce

In today's world, high school graduates have more potential career pathways than ever. And in an ever-changing global economy, educators need more ways than ever to guide that potential and help students uncover their own unique passions, interests, and options for life after graduation. Even if they don't ask for it, all students can use help getting on the path to a meaningful career that allows them to support themselves and/or their families and community.

Recognizing there was more to be done in Cleveland to support students—particularly those who don't choose to pursue post-secondary education immediately after high school—in fall 2019, The Cleveland Foundation and the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) came to Advocacy & Communication Solutions (ACS) to help recalibrate and reformulate how the school district approaches late-high school career readiness.

The Cleveland Foundation and CMSD knew from their history and experience working with ACS that the firm would be able to deploy its expertise and passion for communication, capacity building, and strategy development to support the project.

"I continue to be amazed at the ACS team's grace under fire—they kept the Student Workforce Advancement Group (SWAG) work moving virtually in a pandemic, finding creative ways to engage Work Team members, school staff, scholars, and employers in the face of unprecedented challenges—all with a smile on their faces!" said Helen Williams, program director, Education, The Cleveland Foundation.

### About the Cleveland Metropolitan School District

- ▶ Second largest school district in the State of Ohio
- ▶ 37,158 students
- ▶ 103 schools
- ▶ 85% students who identify as Black, African-American, Hispanic, or Other non-White race/ethnicity
- ▶ 9.5% students with limited English proficiency
- ▶ In Cleveland, 42.2% of children live below the poverty line

### About The Cleveland Foundation

The Cleveland Foundation plays a leadership role in the communities it serves as a grantmaker, convener, and facilitator. With a primary focus on diversity, inclusion, and equity, the foundation works with donors to build community endowment, address needs through grantmaking, and provide leadership on key community issues. Its total assets for the year ending 2020 were \$2.8 billion and it authored \$131 million across 5,503 grants.

## The Challenge

ACS led one of three work teams in the *Linking CMSD Students to Career Pathways and Living Wage Jobs* initiative. The work team comprised 25 executives and staff from the school district, youth-serving and workforce development nonprofits, in-demand industry (manufacturing, health care, and IT) groups, government agencies, and philanthropic organizations, all committed to joining forces and minds to improve young peoples' lives. The work team's challenge was to design a program targeting high school seniors that could be refined and improved in the future. The resulting model was called the Student Workforce Advancement Group, or SWAG: a prototype established in four schools to be tested, broken down, and rebuilt in an iterative process. The timeline was fast: The work team had to devise and be ready to implement the prototype program in less than three months for a January 2020 launch.

"I am grateful to have partners like ACS who share a deep commitment to young people and our city and are ready and willing to dive into the details, listen with an open mind, and drive us toward positive outcomes for our kids," said Eric Gordon, CEO, Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

## The Work

In the first phase of SWAG, ACS not only facilitated meetings with the work team and committees on a weekly basis, but also engaged busy school principals and staff to identify the host schools for the prototype. In addition, ACS led the creation of the curriculum for seniors in the program, crafting engaging lesson plans and a fully designed and printed Student Tracker document to help students reflect on their work over the semester.

To achieve the aggressive timeline and deliver a high-quality program, ACS led the SWAG work team through a rapid-fire strategic development process. ACS used focused committees to develop the curriculum, engage employers outside CMSD, and identify and train community coaches for the students. ACS also hired additional consultants to support outreach to and engagement with area employers and industries.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, ACS relied on its experience as a remote firm to ensure SWAG continued, using both virtual and "snail mail" channels to reach scholars. During the summer of 2020, ACS analyzed multiple outputs and data points from the first phase of the program and created a report on SWAG.

In the fall semester of 2020, SWAG launched a second phase in an all-virtual learning environment for CMSD seniors at all 29 high schools in the district—an important expansion that allowed all seniors to access the program's resources and content. ACS helped the work team create and launch online assignments in CMSD's Naviance digital learning system and supported each school in deciding how best to deploy SWAG, often by embedding it in an existing required Senior Seminar course. In this second phase, ACS deepened student engagement with employers and industry representatives by connecting CMSD scholars to virtual opportunities to learn more about available careers and jobs.



By January 2021, ACS was reaching out to scholars directly with connections to relevant employers and job opportunities. In early 2021, ACS worked with CMSD’s in-house experts to create a tracking tool in the online project management software Smartsheet that enabled school staff like guidance counselors and key community partners to identify and track individual scholars’ post-high school interest and plans. Armed with that knowledge, school and partner staff were able to offer specialized support for each student.

### The Results

As a result of the work team’s consistent engagement and ACS’ effective facilitation, SWAG reached more than 1,000 CMSD seniors between January 2020 and May 2021. More than 100 area employers were engaged in the program—this number continues to grow—and hundreds of virtual events provided students and employers with a chance to connect and learn from one another. The lessons learned from SWAG led to the creation and launch of a district-wide, cross-sector initiative called PACE, or Planning and Career Exploration. PACE includes an embedded curriculum for 6th–12th graders that provides them with knowledge, skills, experiences, and confidence to uncover the occupations or careers they want to pursue. The initiative’s goal is to ensure that all students graduate with an intentional career pathway plan. ACS is proud to be an ongoing partner as the firm helps community partners support Greater Cleveland’s young people as they envision their futures and embark on their career pathways.

Reached  
1,000+  
CMSD  
seniors  
and  
100+ area  
employers

“The SWAG project reinforced what we already know: Northeast Ohio employers view CMSD graduates as an integral part of their talent pipeline. Now is our opportunity—and responsibility—as leaders and professionals to meaningfully connect employers, educators, and students so we can help young people get on a path to success and build a strong workforce for the future,” said Shana Marbury, General Counsel/Senior Vice President Talent, Greater Cleveland Partnership.

### Key Takeaways

In supporting the work of SWAG for the district and the foundation, ACS identified several key practices and approaches that were fundamental to the success of the effort:

- 1. Stay focused on the target audience.** With so many stakeholders involved, it is understandable that the work team had to balance differing perspectives on how best to design and implement this program, including balancing the needs of the schools with the needs and preferences of employers. ACS helped keep a laser focus on the true target audience for the program: CMSD scholars.
- 2. Foster genuine collaboration.** As the facilitators, ACS staff witnessed early on that local non-profits, funders, and employers were ready to roll up their sleeves. Partners continued to show up and do the work in the face of a global pandemic and system-wide shut down. At the core, the work team thrived because everyone’s voice was heard and all members came to the table ready to problem-solve and step outside their comfort zone.

Large, complex projects like SWAG—ones that touch systems as well as individuals—require stakeholders to understand, track, and respond to minor details while they work toward a big-picture vision and goal.

3. **Remain flexible and adaptable.** Original plans largely went out the window in the face of COVID-19. The experience underscored the importance of remaining flexible and adaptable in the face of the unexpected, whether that is a public health crisis, a change in leadership, or a funding snag. With ACS' guidance, the Work Team devised creative, innovative strategies to engage scholars, teachers, and employers in each phase of the project as resources and the reality on the ground shifted.
4. **Provide tailored and responsive technical assistance and support.** ACS served as the “face” of SWAG in the schools, fielding questions and tailoring resources and information, including the syllabi, based on individual schools' unique needs. It was important to continually balance the goal of implementing a consistent program in every school with the reality that each school serves different scholars and brings different strengths and weaknesses to the table. Tailored technical assistance, active listening, and flexibility on all sides helped everyone navigate this balance.
5. **Don't let the details distract you**—but make sure you understand them. Large, complex projects like SWAG—ones that touch systems as well as individuals—require stakeholders to understand, track, and respond to minor details while they work toward a big-picture vision and goal. ACS helped the Work Team navigate both elements for SWAG. First, ACS gained a deep understanding of the content, tools, and processes available to the schools and scholars. Next, ACS identified the real-world challenges the schools and scholars were facing. Finally, ACS filtered that information through a strategic lens for decision-making that kept the project on track.
6. **Use communication effectively and consistently.** Communication is in the ACS name for a reason—it is a specific strength of the team, which was clear throughout the SWAG project. In addition to facilitating the Work Team using thoughtful emails, presentations, meeting agendas, and reports, ACS communicated succinctly with school personnel and employers. By building relationships based on trust, active listening, and mutual respect, and following through on requests and commitments, ACS established open feedback loops with stakeholders that allowed the program to adapt when it needed to and move forward efficiently.