

# Here to Here Case Study

## STUDENT AMBASSADOR FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

### Introduction

HERE to HERE (H2H), a nonprofit organization based in the Bronx, New York, was founded in 2015 to create more equitable career pathways for students of color. Guided by the belief that a “thriving, inclusive economy requires the success of all young people and not a select few,” H2H set out to build a system of support for high school students in the Bronx to develop their leadership, interests, and skills through professional opportunities.

This case study, developed in partnership with the Equitable Futures Initiative, a project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, shares the experiences of H2H Student Ambassadors and the pivotal role they played in steering the H2H vision of creating equitable work-based learning opportunities for young people in the Bronx and throughout New York City. The case study showcases the initiative Student Ambassadors have taken to amplify and design professional development opportunities for themselves and their peers as well as their bold advocacy to increase investment in work-based learning programs.



Students attend the WBL Teen Summit (January, 2020)

H2H works to bridge the gap between the public education system and career development because even as high school and college graduation rates have gone up, barriers to professional success continue to exist. H2H is guided by the vision of all young people in the Bronx and in New York City having access to work-based learning opportunities that will prepare them for family-sustaining careers.

Central to that mission is an unwavering belief in student voice, determination, and decision-making. The H2H Student Ambassador Fellowship program was developed with the intention of having students drive:

1. Information sharing about work-based learning opportunities in their schools;
2. Advocacy for increased investments in work-based learning in New York City; and
3. Their own personal and professional growth through leadership development and strengthening their professional skills.

## The Challenge

H2H understands that current systems of education and workforce development are failing young people of color and students coming from under-resourced communities. The informal nature of work-based learning opportunities, which frequently requires social capital and privilege to access, is the root of the problem. Lack of access to professional development opportunities by students of color further exacerbates the racial wealth gap and disparities in life outcomes.

For students of color, the inability to access work-based learning opportunities creates yet another barrier they must contend with as they attempt to carve out a career for themselves in an increasingly competitive labor market.

Moreover, these systems have not been effective in creating a robust economy, and they are not providing employers with the talent pool they need to stay competitive. As H2H staff succinctly summarize, “this wasted potential in talent and resources reflects the racial and class bias that is endemic to this country.”

**We need youth voice and youth in the room. Countless times we don't have a say, and we're left to deal with the repercussions.**

— La'Toya Beecham  
student at H.E.R.O high school

## The H2H intervention: develop groundbreaking solutions that upend the inherent flaws and biases of educational and career systems by centering students' voices in creating formalized and equitable opportunities for career development.

The stories of H2H Student Ambassadors tell us that career preparation does not necessarily happen in a classroom setting. They provide a snapshot of how work-based learning and leadership programs can support and boost the confidence, leadership, and overall sense of self of young people.

H2H asks that we shift the dominant narrative on education from “learn to earn” to “learn AND earn,” recognizing that race and socio-economic status are barriers for many students, particularly those whose families have lower incomes. By integrating work-based learning into the existing educational system, H2H believes that all students can cultivate the skills necessary for professional success and be prepared for a rapidly changing economy.

To realize this vision, H2H collaborates with students, educators, employers, and policy makers to create various pathways towards success for young people. The organization also works with partners to shift education policy by focusing on career preparation and education that encourages lifelong learning and harnesses the unique skills and talents of young people.

H2H Student Ambassadors have been instrumental in pushing for solutions around the lack of equitable access in work-based learning opportunities in their schools and beyond. In just three years, their work has resulted in an uptick of students from communities with lower-incomes taking advantage of professional development programs, and they have prompted their schools and city government to prioritize work-based learning for high school students.



*I was in a Google coding program and getting amazing experience from that program when I heard about the Student Ambassador Fellowship. I decided to apply to become an ambassador because I wanted to make sure that my younger sister and other lower-class students had experiences to grow like I did when I was at Google. I often think about what I would have missed out on if I hadn't heard about the coding program from my friend or if I didn't get in. I don't think it should just be because of chance that we get to have these experiences.*

**— Jordan Espinal, H2H Student Ambassador**

## At A Glance: Student Ambassador Fellowship program

In 2019, H2H started the Student Ambassador Fellowship program, a paid opportunity for students attending 15 high schools in the Bronx, New York to be leaders in sharing and disseminating work-based learning opportunities to their peers.



*We knew that we didn't have the capacity to get opportunities such as internships and apprenticeships out in front of all the students who need them. It would take a significantly larger H2H team, and schools should be the owners of that work. So we thought there is an opportunity here to elevate student voice and agency within our partner schools and have some students take on paid roles to help lead that work. That is how the Student Ambassador Fellowship program started. The Ambassadors not only share opportunities with their peers, but they lead the conversation on the importance of work-based learning both in their schools and at H2H.*

**– Joshua Poyer**  
H2H Vice President, Student Voice & Hub

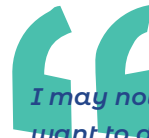
The Student Ambassador Fellowship program is an extension of H2H's focus on equitable access to professional development opportunities for young people. Young people from under-resourced communities may never hear of opportunities to gain professional experience, or, since these opportunities are often unpaid, they cannot participate because they have to prioritize low-paying jobs that may not support their career aspirations. H2H exists because it believes that transforming the existing education and career preparation system is not only necessary but is possible in real time through programs like the Student Ambassadors Fellowship. H2H believes that transformation will be the bedrock for greater economic equity that can have an impact on families and communities for generations. The Student Ambassadors animate the H2H vision by making the change possible amongst their peers and in their schools.



### **H2H's north star: amplify youth voice and encourage their participation in the design and dissemination of work-based learning opportunities.**

The fellowship has distinct and integrated goals that include professional skills development for Ambassadors and more students taking advantage of work-based learning opportunities across the 15 schools that H2H partners with. The program is structured around bimonthly meetings where Student Ambassadors come together to acquire skills, plan events and actions, hear from guest speakers about different careers, and learn about work-based learning opportunities to share with their peers.

The Student Ambassador Fellowship program aims to foster Ambassadors' professional skills by engaging them as spokespeople, including them in advocacy efforts, and soliciting their input in the design of outputs related to H2H demonstrations and city-sponsored initiatives such as Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEP).



*I may not know exactly what I want to do when I get older. I have some idea, but I know this program has helped me gain skills that I know I can use later in life. I'm no longer afraid to share my opinion. I know that my ideas are useful and can be used to make things happen—like the events we put on where I was a moderator or how I helped find new ways of getting other students excited to participate in different programs.*

**– Litza Rosario,**  
H2H Student Ambassador

## Student Ambassador Fellowship program goals

1.

### Create

a network of student ambassadors who represent their high schools and H2H.

2.

### Expand

the reach of how many students are informed of work-based learning opportunities.

3.

### Encourage

Ambassadors to become leaders in their schools and communities through soft skill development.

When developing the Student Ambassador Fellowship program, H2H asked the question: *“What if students disseminated information on professional development opportunities to their peers?”*

Before the first year of the program came to a close, H2H had their answer. Student Ambassadors became leaders in their schools, with students and teachers turning to them to get more information on work-based learning opportunities. Even when there is an absence of formalized work-based learning programs, the Student Ambassadors have prompted their schools to place greater value and investment in work-based learning.

The first and subsequent cohorts of Ambassadors also proved that students can be powerful champions not just in their schools but across the Bronx and New York City. During the first year of the program, students planned two city-wide conferences on work-based learning. These conferences, which were well attended, were designed to help encourage their peers to take advantage of paid internships and other professional learning opportunities.

Through their advocacy, the Student Ambassadors have also pushed New York City elected officials and policy makers to listen to young people and prioritize work-based learning. For example, in 2021, the Ambassadors participated in policy and advocacy conversations such as the Teens Take Charge Mayoral Forum. At the Forum, high school students from around New York City engaged directly with mayoral candidates on issues related to work-based learning and other topics of interest to them. The Forum was spearheaded by Teens Take Charge, a NYC student-led movement that includes some H2H Student Ambassadors.



*“The group has been extremely welcoming, and I love that we all help one another out with kindness and by giving positive feedback. I never felt out of place or like I was lost because every ambassador and staff member has shown me constant support. I think that is the best thing about being a part of this Ambassador Fellowship.”*

– Cohort 2 Student Ambassador





## Student Ambassador Professional Development Opportunities

Policy & Campaigns

Relationship Management

Expanding Your Network

Youth Advocacy

Facilitation

Financial Literacy

Public Speaking

Personal Branding

Community Mapping

## A Glimpse into an Ambassador Session

1. All sessions begin with a check in with H2H staff where Ambassadors share the peaks and valleys of their week: what's going well and what's been challenging. This allows for Ambassadors to provide peer to peer support, uncover new opportunities for collaboration, and share best practices.
2. After the initial check-in, H2H staff share the latest work-based learning opportunities with the Student Ambassadors. Part of this process includes reviewing and getting Ambassador input on *ImBlast*, a weekly newsletter announcing different work-based learning opportunities and shared with partner schools. During this time, staff answer questions and make sure Ambassadors are equipped with all the information they need to promote new opportunities at their schools.
3. Next, opportunities within H2H are shared with the student ambassadors. This ensures Student Ambassador participation throughout the organization. If there is interest in supporting a specific project, we connect the students to the staff members who are leading that work so they can get further insight and set up a time to meet.
4. Finally, the professional development agenda for the week's session starts. Session topics vary week by week but include skill development, such as resume writing or learning how to facilitate a workshop. Sometimes a session also includes a guest speaker.
5. The bi-weekly session always wraps up with discussion and time for questions as well as a recap of the work-based learning opportunities that Ambassadors should be sharing at their schools.
6. The closing is just as important and is seen as another opportunity to harness the power of community, collaboration, and connection amongst the Ambassadors. A popular closing that students have been using has been to offer a "superpower" to another student. For example: "I give the superpower of *clarity* to X, and I hope you can use your superpower to..."
7. The day after the session, H2H staff send an email to the Ambassadors summarizing what was discussed and the resources they need to promote and advocate for work-based learning opportunities at their schools and beyond.



I don't remember how I heard about the Student Ambassador Fellowship, but I do remember hearing that it was about advocacy and public speaking. And I thought this must be for me because I'm a really talkative person. Growing up in Togo, I had been doing public speaking since I was 5 years old. In the Islamic faith, there's something called Musabaqah where we memorize the Quran and recite passages in front of our community. I was always confident, but my friends were nervous and shaking when it was their turn to recite their passage. Coming to America, I was still talkative because that's who I am but not always as confident with public speaking in English and in front of people I don't know. Becoming an ambassador really helped make me more confident.

At the Bronx International High School, there are a lot of kids who are like me because there are kids from everywhere who just came to America. I think they relate to me and listen to me when I promote different opportunities because I think they see how much I've grown from my apprenticeship with Accenture, a global consulting firm. I think it helps them to see someone who has a similar background participating in these different programs because it can be intimidating, especially for the students who don't speak English that well. But I translate the job opportunities that we post into French, and the other ambassador from my school translates them into Spanish. They know they can come to us with any questions.

I always tell them that now I can speak in front of anyone, and I learned how to work collaboratively with other people. I never liked working with other people; I would always ask if I could work on assignments independently. But through my internship, I learned that working with other people and exchanging ideas is actually fun. Now, I love working with people.

— Soumeya Aboulaye, H2H Student Ambassador

Annually 30 students participate in the H2H Student Ambassador Fellowship program. H2H works with a network of 15 high schools to identify two students per school, one upperclassmen (11th or 12th grade) and two lowerclassmen (9th or 10 grade) to apply to the fellowship. In 2019, the first year of the program, they received 50 applications and 73 the following year.

## H2H Ambassadors have skills

Ambassadors from the 2020-21 cohort identified the following skills acquired by participating in the program.

**Leadership Skills**

**Collaborative Ideation**

**Team Work**

**Community Building**

**Event Planning**

**Presentation Skills**

**Time Management**

**Advocacy**

**Public Speaking**

**Networking**





It was the beginning of my senior year and when I should have been feeling excited, I was actually feeling discouraged with my leadership skills and my involvement in my school. I had applied for a school youth leader position, but I ended up not getting it and was really sad. I thought this was my last chance to do something important at my school.

It was around that time that I heard about the Student Ambassador Fellowship. I applied right away, and I can't tell you how excited I was when I got the position. During the orientation, I realized the program was going to give me so much of what I wanted for my last year of high school, which was really to get more skills, experiences, and to be seen as a leader in my school.

I haven't been disappointed because I got even more than what I thought I was signing up for. Just last week I was the only student on a panel to discuss the Key Distinguishers of Work-Based Learning success. I shared my experiences and ideas for how to improve schools and give students more opportunities to gain professional skills. I was surprised by how invested these older people were in what I had to say.

And I can honestly say that my school is changing. I feel like teachers get why it's important to listen to students and why we need to start thinking about our careers from when we start high school. I've helped freshmen create their first resumes and supported them in applying for jobs. I think the changes at my school from when I started where our voices were not respected to being given the chance to be leaders in our education has made a huge impact. Our graduation rates have gone up, and this year 85% of my class will be graduating.

— Leyla Reyes, H2H Ambassador

## Student Ambassadors In Action



In the midst of a global pandemic, H2H, like all organizations, had to pivot to doing their work virtually. The Student Ambassadors shifted from in-person, biweekly meetings to virtual meetings. But despite the shift, students continued to be proactive in developing interventions and resources to improve and increase work-based learning opportunities for New York City students.

### Language Guide

Recognizing that asset-based language is one of many factors that contributes to work environments that encourage young people and gives them the opportunity to thrive, in 2019, H2H developed “*Language Guide: A Resource for Using Asset-Based Language with Young People.*”



*“Working on the language guide felt great because I knew that it would be useful to so many people. H2H gave me so much decision-making power, and it’s not what I expected. I didn’t expect that they would be so invested in my agency because that’s not how it usually goes. The language guide fits so well with their mission, and even more evident of their commitment to their mission is how they treat young people like me and the way they cultivate our power and voice to create what we feel is needed in the world.”*

**— Makan Ceessay, H2H Intern**

The guide was developed in response to a young person having to deal with a racialized (micro) aggression that was intended as encouragement from a potential employer but missed the mark. H2H wanted to develop a concrete tool to address the implicit and often explicit bias that students of color in particular encounter at schools, at work, and in the world at large. The language guide is a powerful example of how student-informed products can help build bridges between talent and opportunity.

The first cohort of Student Ambassadors understood that in order for them and their peers to get the most out of work-based learning programs, employers and the work environment more broadly had to be free of (micro)aggressions and preconceived notions about who they are. Thus, they made it their mission to share the guide broadly at their schools and employers and with other partners.

The guide, intended for advocates, educators, and media in addition to employers, underscores the critical importance of creating truly inclusive work environments that reject harmful stereotypes and encourage the use of asset-based language in and outside the workplace. Specifically, the guide asks that employers and others conduct an inventory of the language they use to describe young people and incorporate an asset-based perspective into their communications as well as their workplace culture.

The language guide implores readers to recognize that the words and phrases that are used to describe and refer to students set the tone for whether students can be successful in the workplace or not.

By prioritizing language that is asset-based, people-first, and specific, the guide offers a straightforward check-list to ensure that young people are seen and their humanity is respected. It also helps in connecting language to the culture shifts necessary for creating equitable systems of work and education.

Following the rollout of the guide, the Student Ambassadors were curious to hear if the guide resonated with employers and other partners. In fall 2020, Ambassadors helped to organize the Words Matter panel, a student-led conference that brought together employers, educators, and student leaders to talk about the importance of using asset-based language.

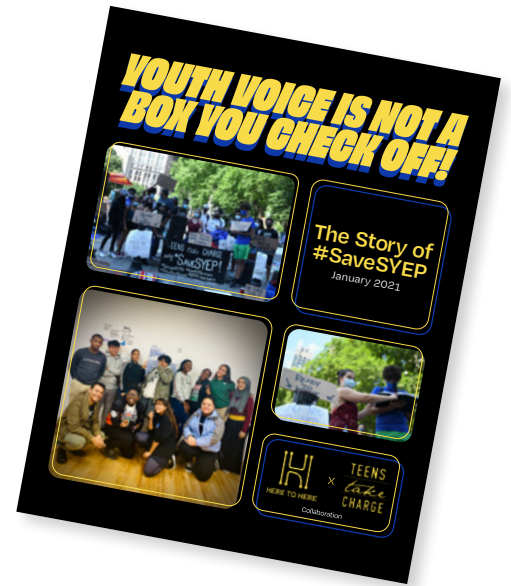


**H2H Student Ambassador Litza Rosario speaking at the H2H “Words Matter” virtual conference.**

## Summer Youth Employment Program

The New York City Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) is the largest youth employment program in the country providing paid job opportunities to more than 70,000 young people from the ages of 14 to 24 every summer. For youth of color, the program has been instrumental for career exploration and professional development. SYEP has been credited in helping to address the disparities in access to work-based learning social capital that students from under-resourced communities often have a hard time accessing without programs like SYEP.

Given the reach and vital role SYEP played in young people's lives, when New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the program's cancellation in April 2020, students and educators were deeply disappointed. But young people channeled their disappointment into action and launched the #SaveSYEP campaign. Teens Take Charge spearheaded the campaign to save the program. Given the pandemic lockdown, youth from across New York, including H2H Student Ambassadors, relied exclusively on digital and social media tools to make their voices heard. They mobilized thousands of young people to share their experiences, demonstrate the value of work-based learning, and to build the case for restoring SYEP. Their efforts resulted in 40,000 signatures on an online petition, student authored op-eds, and countless articles being published by reporters on the issue.



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*I knew that not having a job would affect me mentally. I would lose my exposure to the world. I needed to be connected with other youth. I needed something to do simply for the sake of my mental health. I spent time being productive, doing this advocacy work, something I hadn't felt with remote learning.*

– **La'Toya Beecham**  
H2H Ambassador and lead organizer  
of the #SaveSYEP campaign.

**La'Toya Beecham with Teens Take Charge  
at a rally to end school screenings.**



H2H Student Ambassadors led other student organizers in brainstorming and presenting alternative models to SYEP in-person jobs because they understood that without an alternative proposal, it would be easy for the City to discredit them and continue with plans to shut down the program. They joined forces with partners ExpandEd, BEAM Center, and other youth advocacy organizations to develop remote and socially distanced employment alternatives for NYC youth to take advantage of during the pandemic.

Ultimately, the #SaveSYEP campaign was successful, and 35,000 remote jobs were restored for young people in summer 2020. While fewer job opportunities were available compared to previous years, it was a victory nonetheless. In summer 2021, SYEP was fully reinstated with nearly 75,000 jobs made available to young people. The #SaveSYEP campaign can take some responsibility for that because elected officials understood that they could no longer ignore the power of young people.



I was disillusioned once I heard that it'd be cancelled this year. Which I find to be ridiculous. In a time of economic hardship, having SYEP should have been a no-brainer. Once again, the gap between the poor and rich is widening, all due to the refusal to allocate some money toward SYEP. A program which would've served as an invaluable experience, in addition to being an essential one. Jobs, nowadays, are hard to come by, and SYEP was almost my guarantee at being able to help out financially. So, to find out that SYEP is being cancelled is something I find absurd, especially now when thousands have now filed for unemployment. Politicians preach the idea of ending the gap between the rich and the poor. SYEP is a step clearly in the wrong direction. In a time of need, cutting back programs that help lessen this curve is absurd."

**— Anonymous student quote in the #SaveSYEP report, "Student Voice is not a Box You Check Off!"**

## Student Ambassador-Led Events

Another core component of the H2H Student Ambassador Fellowship program is student-led and designed events that bring students, employers, policymakers, and other stakeholders together to discuss topics related to the value of work-based learning and the importance of including and amplifying youth voices in education policy. These events offer an opportunity for students to plan events on topics that are important to them. H2H staff support students in implementing their ideas, but the conception of these programs comes directly from the students.



Over the past two years, despite the pandemic, Student Ambassadors have developed the programming for several high turnout virtual events, including the ones mentioned above related to the Language Guide and the SYEP.

The last in-person event the Ambassadors put on before the pandemic was the 2020 Work-Based Learning Teen Summit, which became a flagship event for the 2020 cohort of Student Ambassadors because of its success in turnout, reach, and the depth of programming.

The Summit convened students, educators, and policy makers to discuss various topics related to the importance of work-based learning and the impact of these programs on young people's lives. Along with student activists from Teens Take Charge, H2H Ambassadors created programming that facilitated educators and policymakers to hear from and learn from students' experiences with work-based learning programs. And for young people, the summit was an opportunity to learn about different types of work-based learning programs in New York City.

Most recently, the Student Ambassadors hosted the Bronx Youth Action Showcase, a virtual conference attended by 133 people. In partnership with other youth serving and advocacy groups, they facilitated discussions on meaningful work-based learning programs and shared opportunities their peers could pursue. They also elevated the critical need for increased investments in community services and shared resources for families adversely impacted by the pandemic.



**H2H Student Ambassadors (from L-R), Nicole Vargas, Isaury Espinal, La'Toya Beecham and Litza Rosario, attend the 2020 Bronx State of Borough Address where they received citation of merit from the Bronx Borough President.**







The Student Ambassadors and our partnership with H2H in the last year helped to turn things around for my students. I'm telling you, they make me look good and more successful at my job.

As a work-based learning coordinator, my job is to connect students to different job opportunities. The Student Ambassadors have really helped in getting the word out because they offer a different outlook than the one I can give the students. They give the perspective of a participant rather than a teacher saying "you should apply." The ambassadors speak their language and can share their own experiences, which makes a big difference.

I've had students who kept their cameras and mics off during all their remote classes because they are new immigrants and were nervous to be called on. They were present and even paying attention but had too much anxiety to actually be visible or let alone participate in their classroom discussions. After some of them started going to after school work-based learning programs, I saw a huge transformation in their confidence. The cameras are now on and they are learning to speak up.

I have a girl who moved to the U.S. during the pandemic, and she was so panicked when starting a program that teaches students documentary filmmaking. The organizers of the program were really good about putting her in a group with other Spanish-speaking students, and she was able to use her Spanish to interview someone in Mexico. I could tell she felt really valued after that, and everything changed for her from that point. At the end of the program, they had a screening of the documentary, and students were asked to do a presentation on their experiences. She chose to do her presentation in English, and I could tell she was very frightened but at the same time very proud of herself. Now she's asking me to find her other opportunities.

— Demaris Mercado, Work-Based Learning Coordinator, Bronx International High School

## Conclusion

Young people are frequently underestimated by the education system, policy makers, and society at large. Their opinions are often ignored and sidelined. Students of color and young people from under-resourced communities experience this bias and ageism even more, with fewer opportunities available for them to amplify their voice and leadership or grow their professional skills.

**H2H believes in the full potential of young people as they are today and not just their potential projected into the future.**

The H2H Student Ambassador Fellowship program demonstrates the impact that young people can have in their schools and communities if they are truly valued and given the space to tap into their innate creativity and leadership. The H2H story also shows us that work-based learning is not simply about career preparation but lifelong learning and leadership.

The success of the Student Ambassador Fellowship program over the last three years comes from the participatory design of the fellowship and its focus on giving students the opportunity to learn while they earn. Through their paid position as ambassadors, which is a role that is akin to assistant work-based learning coordinators, students have been able to strengthen their professional skills while supporting the H2H goal of making work-based learning more equitable and accessible. The Student Ambassadors have been a boon to H2H's mission as they have been to countless young people in the Bronx and in NYC who have been able to take advantage of work-based learning opportunities. Simply put, the Student Ambassador strategy has been a win on multiple fronts from individual and community to organizational impact.

But above all, the H2H Student Ambassador model shows us what is possible when we dare believe in young people and invest not just in who they will become in the future but in who they are today.



Students attend the WBL Teen Summit (January, 2020)