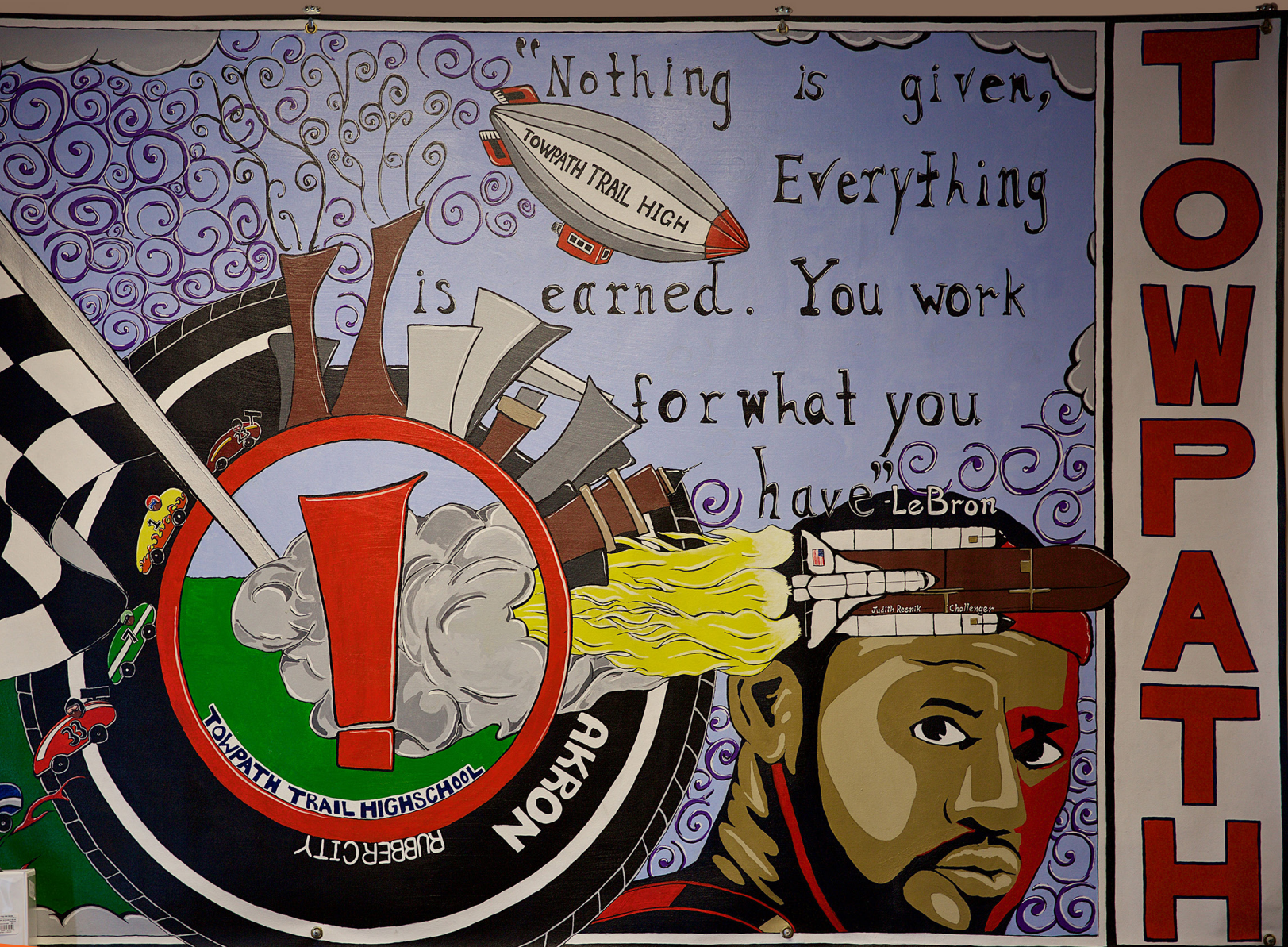


PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Towpath Trail High School gives students the tools to build a better future

By Lyman Millard



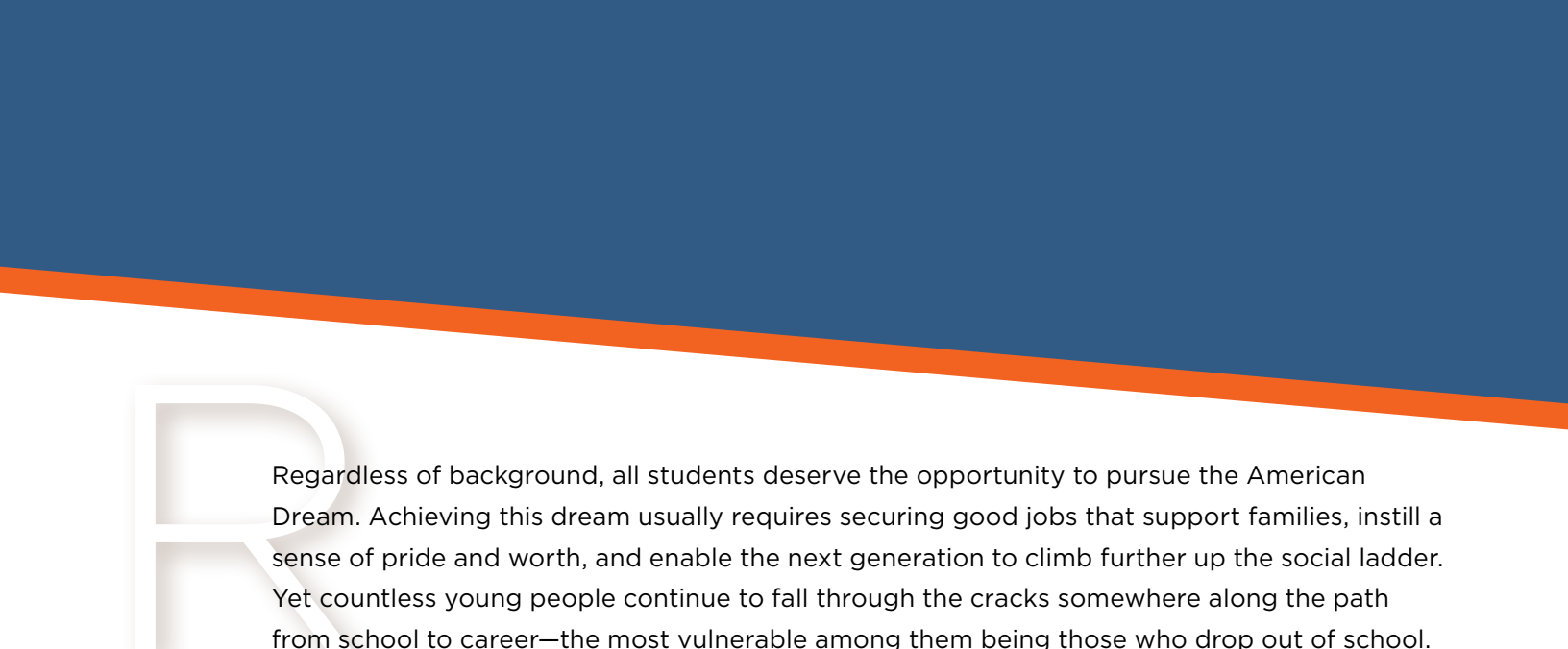


TOWPATH

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Regardless of background, all students deserve the opportunity to pursue the American Dream. Achieving this dream usually requires securing good jobs that support families, instill a sense of pride and worth, and enable the next generation to climb further up the social ladder. Yet countless young people continue to fall through the cracks somewhere along the path from school to career—the most vulnerable among them being those who drop out of school.

According to a recent What Works Clearinghouse [review](#), the most effective dropout-prevention strategy is to directly connect schoolwork to students' career aspirations. The school profile that follows goes beyond the data and puts a human face on the real-world impact of dropout prevention, done right. Author Lyman Millard of the Bloomwell Group offers a fascinating look at a dropout-recovery charter school, Towpath Trail High School in Akron, that engages at-risk young people through career and technical education. For one student—a refugee from the war-torn Middle East—the school has become a home where she's thrived and now dreams of becoming a heart surgeon. The stories are similar for two other Towpath students: one, who became a mom at a young age, leveraged the school's healthcare programs to earn a nurse aide certification and another jumped at the chance to earn a construction certificate.

Skeptics may question our selection of a dropout-recovery charter school for a profile on “pathways to success.” It's true that dropout recovery doesn't have a spotless reputation, and the results of schools focused on serving dropouts have been uneven (bearing in mind, of course, the challenges facing their students). But as this profile shows, dropout recovery need not be the mind-numbing sort that parks students in front of computers all day. Instead, it reveals what dropout recovery can and should be: an approach that blends rigorous academics and hands-on experience, engaging at-risk students in their education while imparting valuable career-ready skills. As Ohio policymakers explore ways to keep young people in school and strengthen their career prospects, they can learn from the approach that Towpath has taken.

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— AARON CHURCHILL
Ohio Research Director
Thomas B. Fordham Institute



Razya Tazamir and her science teacher and mentor, “Mr. Dave,” who is helping Razya choose a college for the next phase in her pathway.

7,000-mile pathway to success

As Razya Tazamir tells the story of her journey from her childhood home to a refugee camp, on to America, and now to deciding where to go to college, all in perfect English, it’s hard to believe that she only started learning the language three years ago.

She fled Afghanistan with her mother and six siblings after her father was killed in a land dispute. Growing up in a refugee camp in Tajikistan, Razya began working at age nine “so we would have something to eat.” She would wake up at 5:00 a.m. to find a good spot on the road to sell fruits and vegetables. At noon, she’d hurry home to change into her school uniform and go to class. Afterwards, she’d change back into her street clothes and sell food until 8:00 or 9:00 at night. Despite this grueling schedule, Razya took her studies very seriously: “I was the best in my class.”

After four years, her family was given the chance to immigrate to Akron, Ohio. The local refugee resettlement agency helped her mother find a house and get the children enrolled in school. Razya initially felt overwhelmed by her large, traditional district high school. “It was pretty big, but it had lots of children from different countries.” She was especially surprised by the way many of the students acted. “There was a lot of cursing, screaming, and fighting, even in front of the teachers,” she remembers. “It was frustrating because I came here to learn something. I hated it at first, but eventually I got used to it.”

Given Razya’s sparkling personality, it’s little surprise that she made friends quickly. She overcame the language barrier by texting, which also helped her learn English quickly. As she learned English and began to excel in school,

things changed. “I began to get bullied, a lot. Not by American kids but by Afghani kids.” When her best friend turned on her, school became miserable for Razya, and she spiraled into a depression that caused this bright young woman to drop out of school.

After sitting at home for a month, Razya knew she needed to get back on track, but she dreaded the thought of her old school. Then she found Towpath Trail High School. “It was amazing,” remembers Razya. “There was no screaming, there was no drama.” She especially appreciated how

much personal attention she got from her teachers. “They really care about me and want to help me.” As an incredibly smart, motivated student, Razya also loved that she could work at her own pace: “if you get a good grade, you can just keep on going.” That flexibility and Razya’s incredible work ethic enabled her to earn a year’s worth of high school credits in just four months. Now this former high school dropout is working with her science teacher, “Mr. Dave,” to decide where to go to college as she pursues her dream of becoming a heart surgeon.

A school’s own journey

Razya’s high school has been on its own winding journey, though not nearly as perilous as her own. The school was started in 2000 as Life Skills Center of Akron, one of Ohio’s first charter high schools to serve young people who were at risk of dropping out. The school was founded by the Akron-based White Hat Management Company, which at one time was Ohio’s largest charter school operator but had a poor reputation for academic quality.

Unhappy with a contract that required the school to turn over 95 percent of its state revenue to White Hat, the school’s board decided not to renew their contract in 2012. They found a new operator, Cambridge Group, which offered a transparent contract, charged a reasonable management fee, and provided much more support for the school. The school relaunched with eighty students in a new location as Towpath Trail High School.

Towpath Trail High School continued to grow and build a strong reputation for quality, even among the local school district’s guidance counselors, when it faced another dramatic change of management company. Marcus May, the majority owner of Cambridge, had been indicted for fraud with a company he owned in Florida. May’s three partners in Cambridge quickly worked to remove him from the company. The experience



John Stack began his career as a social studies teacher at Towpath Trail High School and then served as the school’s principal. He now oversees twelve high schools as the CEO of Oakmont Education.

prompted two of the partners to leave, but one remained committed to seeing the work through. “Marty Erbaugh really liked the mission and what we were doing,” remembers former Towpath Trail principal John Stack. “He didn’t want to let Marcus’s mistakes taint the vision and mission of serving vulnerable kids.”

Marty found an excellent partner for preserving that vision in John, who had started working at Towpath Trail as a social studies teacher back in 2001. By 2007, John had been promoted to principal, and he helped guide the school through their transition to a new management company

“Ninety-five percent of our students are living in poverty and a high school diploma wasn’t enough, but helping them earn an industry credential and a \$15–\$20 an hour job right out of high school is life changing.” — JOHN STACK



and location in 2012. Afterwards, John joined Cambridge, where he eventually oversaw all of their schools. Together, Marty and John launched Oakmont Education in 2018.

In launching Oakmont, Marty and John set about reimagining what the schools could do for their students. While Cambridge had focused on opening new schools, “we wanted to focus on quality and student outcomes,” said John. They also wanted to go beyond helping young people who were at risk of dropping out to earn their high school diploma. They wanted to help them get a career. “Ninety-five percent of our students are living in poverty and a high school diploma wasn’t enough, but helping them earn an industry credential and a \$15–\$20 an hour job right out of high school is life changing.”

Their desire to transform the trajectory of their students’ lives prompted John and his team at Oakmont Education to help their schools develop a robust career-tech program. To lead that effort, he recruited Dr. Jerry Farley, one of Ohio’s leading experts in integrating comprehensive student support, industry credentialing, and hands-on job experience into skills-focused academic programs. Over the past year, Oakmont Education has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into developing career-tech centers in all of their high school facilities across Ohio.

Not just earning a diploma, but building a pathway to a career

The increased focus on career and technical education is already paying off for Towpath students. Charisma Fields started at Towpath Trail last year, after the birth of her son almost derailed her high school career. “I absolutely love this school,” said Charisma. “They really care about me.” She is finishing up her high school diploma at Towpath’s original, downtown campus and is on track to graduate in June. “My brother’s planning a really big party for me,” she says with a huge smile.

But every Tuesday and Thursday, Charisma takes the bus to Towpath Trail East, a new satellite campus a few miles away, for hands-on classes that prepare her for the state’s nurse aide certification (STNA). “They’re teaching us real nursing skills and giving us the tools to take really good care of people.” For her, earning an STNA is both the key to a better-paying job and a stepping stone in a healthcare career. “When I was eight years old, I got to see a neo-natal unit, and ever since then I’ve always wanted to be a nurse,” said Charisma.

Ryan Andrick oversees Towpath Trail East’s career-tech program, which offers training for state-certified nurse aides and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration certification for construction workers. “We have big plans for providing more training in the coming years, but we’re building the program slowly,” says Ryan.

“I knew I had to do it. Getting more than just a diploma was a great stepping stone to a lot of job opportunities for me.” – LOGAN WISE

Those plans include adding phlebotomy training for healthcare workers and a residential facilities maintenance certification next year. “Our goal is to help students stack a whole series of industry credentials so they can get the job they want.” In a nod to their construction program, Ryan added, “It’s like building a house: we want to start with a really strong foundation.”

Logan Wise also came to the Towpath Trail East campus last year, but his goal was to complete his high school diploma. “My last school didn’t help me, and I really fell behind on my credits.” He appreciates how much personal attention he gets from his teachers and especially the school environment. “It’s nice, quiet, and calm here. You can focus on getting your work done,” said Logan. As Logan was working on his high school diploma, Towpath Trail East launched their construction career-tech program. “I knew I had to do it,” said Logan. “Getting more than just a diploma was a great stepping stone to a lot of job opportunities for me.” Logan and his classmates are earning their OSHA-10 Card and National Center for Construction Education and Research certification through both classroom instruction and at a Habitat for Humanity construction site.

Logan is learning his new trade from Scott Billet, a seasoned veteran. Billet has worked in construction for over thirty years and even helped build Towpath Trail East’s career-tech wing. He first heard of Towpath Trail when he was helping his stepdaughter get back on track after running away from home with “her punk ex-boyfriend.” Scott was impressed with how the school staff helped her recover academically, earn a diploma, and get a good job in First Energy’s billing department. “When it came time to start the construction program, [Towpath East principal] Brian called me, and I just couldn’t say no.” It turns out that Scott wasn’t just an experienced builder; he also had a long history of volunteering with low-income teens. “This was the perfect chance to bring my passion and my work together in one job.”



Charisma Fields and her classmates learn how to safely transition a patient from a walker to a wheelchair in Towpath Trail High School’s STNA training program.

Giving them the tools

What is most evident in talking with the students, staff, and leaders of these schools and at Oakmont Education is how much people care about the students. It is evident in the way the young men and women talk about their teachers and principals. It’s evident in the pride that the school staff has in their students. It is clear in the way Oakmont’s CEO John Stack talks about the opportunities he wants to create for his students.

It was even evident in Oakmont’s vice president of curriculum coming in to lead a yoga workshop for the students. Whether on the pathway to becoming a heart surgeon, a nurse, or a builder, these caring adults are deeply committed to giving students like Razya, Charisma, and Logan the tools they need to build a brighter future.

Janusz Szczotka

