



OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL

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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Minutes

November 13, 2025
4:00 p.m.

Location: Lynwood Roberts Room

In attendance: Chair Freeman, Vice Chair Amaro, Council Members Pittman,

Also: John Everett, Kids Hope Alliance (Director of Workforce Development & College Career Readiness); Trista Carraher, Council Auditor's Office; Shannon MacGillis, Office of General Counsel; Brandon Russell, Council Research

Meeting Convened: 3:31 p.m.

Meeting Call to Order:

Chair Freeman called the meeting to order.

Introductions and Welcome:

Chair Freeman welcomed the group and called for introductions.

Purpose of Meeting

Chair Freeman stated that the meeting was the first of four workshops guiding a unified \$5 million investment in youth empowerment for fiscal year 2027. He stated that the initiative focuses on four tracks:

1. Education, life skills, mentorship, and civic engagement
2. Recreational access and safe community spaces
3. Job training, career pipelines, and apprenticeships
4. Public safety, lighting, and technology-enabled infrastructure

He said the priorities come from youth surveys, listening sessions, and provider input, where young people expressed a need for guidance that continues after high school, safe spaces they can trust, paid career opportunities, and environments where they feel protected and supported. He added that the Special Committee's job was to translate those needs into smart investments that drive outcomes, so young people can have the tools and experience to thrive.

System Impact Overview

John Everett, the Director of Workforce Development and College Career Readiness for Kids Hope Alliance, provided a brief, system-level snapshot connecting all youth empowerment efforts to citywide outcomes. He stated that the core issue is addressing how to scale what works while ensuring access across all of Jacksonville's neighborhoods. He noted that Jacksonville's youth do not struggle with potential but struggle with continuity. He said the top issue for young people, according to their surveys and listening sessions, was what happens after high school. He said youth expressed a desire for paid, real-world experience, mentorship that doesn't end at age 18, reliable transportation, and clear information about careers in Jacksonville. He said that youth success in the City is often accidental but not predictable, and this must change.

He continued, stating that providers are doing great work, but in isolation. He shared feedback from the Workforce Innovations Network: there are strong programs but not a strong system. They also find that services remain siloed by zip code and funding source, and that mentorship and transition support end after high school, when young people need them most. He also said that the labor market in Jacksonville is growing but youth are disconnected from it.

He says that everything they see in the data points to one solution: the highest-impact investments are those that create continuity, consistent mentorship, guided pathways, and paid experiences that follow young people to age 24. He said the question before the committee is what it will take to scale the models that work and make them accessible across the City.

Partner Presentations

The Committee transitioned to presentations from two organizations whose work centers on mentorship and leadership development. Chair Freeman said they would have presentations from Jason Peoples of the Jacksonville Arts and Music School on their What a Leader program, and from Sara Alford of Big Brothers Big Sisters on their Beyond School Walls program.

Mr. Peoples began his presentation with a video showcase of their What a Leader program. He stated that the What a Leader program is a leadership training initiative for students in grade 6 to age 16. The mission is to equip youth to lead today and thrive tomorrow. The program focuses on soft skills, emphasizing confidence, critical thinking, communication, professionalism, and relationship development.

He said 96 percent of employers cite communication as the most important career-readiness skill, and 91 percent say human skills, or soft skills, are increasingly important. He continued with more data, indicating that 89 percent of businesses consider professionalism an essential competency, but noted that fewer than 32 percent of US youth receive impactful leadership training before the age of 25. Fewer than 16 percent of those with access to leadership development experiences will have a verifiable impact by age 25.

He then provided data on the impact of their program, including the number of students served, the schools served, and the growing number of partnering businesses and community stakeholders. He noted

that they serve students at public, public charter, and private schools. He said they are currently serving 935 students, 23 percent higher than the previous year and exceeding their goal of 800.

He stated that they are developing a What a Leader Master Certification, which participants can earn by earning badges in the program's core areas, and that it is accessible to those in the greater metropolitan area. He said they were planning to beta-test in February to prepare for the program launch in March. He said they are meeting with the Mayor of Cleveland, who wants the program in their city.

He then provided an overview of the competition portion of the program. This portion is composed of three parts. The first round is the Social Mixer, where leaders demonstrate their confidence and communication skills by applying the core competencies in a dynamic professional networking setting. Round 2 is Center Stage, where leaders rotate through a series of high-impact role-play scenarios. Finalists move to round 3, the Executive Suite, where leaders step into the professional world by engaging directly with senior-level executives at prominent businesses and organizations. The program winner receives their trademark gold blazer and a \$5,000 scholarship prize. Last year's winner was Roy Harvison.

He concluded that Jacksonville is poised to become a destination for youth transformation. He said increased funding is needed for more staff, research and curriculum development, system maintenance for their online platform, their annual competition, and marketing.

CM Amaro asked how they identify the students to participate in the program. Mr. Peoples said that the program is free to any school or out-of-school-time program. He added that they work with KHA to ensure that their programs know What a Leader exists. He said they could definitely increase awareness of the program, and that it is open to anyone and free.

Chair Freeman asked if there was any data on which after-school programs their participants attend. Mr. Peoples said that they do have that data but he did not have it with him. He said this was the first year they had pushed into after-school programs.

CM Pittman said that there was a need for programs like this to give young people options. CM Amaro then asked if there were any metrics for students who completed the program and then pursued secondary education. Mr. Peoples said that their first group of students was in grades 6 through 8 and are just now entering secondary education institutions, and that they will have better data as time moves forward.

Chair Freeman indicated that he filed legislation for \$200,000 to go to a company to provide data on the impact of the Special Committee's work so that they could present data to next year's Council to continue the Committee's work.

Sara Alford from Big Brothers and Big Sisters began her presentation on their Beyond School Walls program. She provided an overview of Big Brothers Big Sisters, noting that Jacksonville was one of the oldest models, having been in existence for 111 years.

She stated that their model aims to create a broader ecosystem for young people beyond their assigned mentor to ensure all their needs are met—the focus is on outcomes such as post-secondary choices, social-emotional health, and inclusion and belonging.

She stated that they are among the most research- and evidence-based entities, with their Littles being more confident in their schoolwork, more likely to take on leadership roles, and entering adulthood with educational and career options while getting along better with their families.

She stated a new longitudinal study from Harvard University and the US Treasury Department shows that those who were mentored were more likely to go on to college, earning 15 percent more than their non-mentored peers, and closing a majority of the gap between their family's income and their Big's income.

She explained that Florida was the third-most populous state in the US and that around 15% of households were below the poverty line and an estimated 30% were ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed). By 2030, an estimated 6 million more residents will call Florida home, and 2 million more jobs will be needed, despite 72 percent of Florida's workforce leaders struggling to find talent and fill positions. She continued, explaining that one-third of youth will grow up without a mentor and that 17 percent of youth are disconnected from school and career options and at risk of not achieving a productive adulthood.

Ms. Alford explained that when young people experience challenges, it shows up in educational success or failure, mental health conditions, behavioral issues, and crime in the city. She said that the impact of declining economic conditions is evident in the community through rising crime and declining wellness and quality-of-life measures. She added that businesses feel it in the talent pipeline as well.

She said that her organization seeks to address this by partnering with other organizations through its Beyond School Walls program, which connects students from complementary career academies, pathways, and programs focused on postsecondary attainment with mentors from local businesses representing targeted industries. They have run the program for 15 years, and young people are paired with mentors in compatible industries. Young people visit a site once a month for job shadowing and mentorship. She added that this program has the added benefit of increasing corporate social responsibility, and those participating companies have seen employee engagement, retention, and satisfaction increase. She said that employers must commit to at least two school years to ensure continuity.

She continued, adding that mentoring occurs monthly for 3 to four hours. The sessions are typically divided into training, job shadowing, and mentoring. Ongoing support and supervision provide access to supportive resources and connections to additional resources that aid success.

She said that last year they served 360 young people. She said that the other indicators they track include academic achievement, behavior, attendance, and engagement. She indicated that 100 percent of their seniors have graduated from high school, 99 percent have been promoted to the next grade and maintained or improved classroom behavior, and 96 percent have maintained or improved school attendance. She said they leverage funding from KHA and various departments within the State of Florida, totaling nearly \$800,000. She then shared a story about Maleeya McWhite, who participated in the program, successfully gained employment, and is also a mentor herself.

She stated that authentic alignment is key to long-term partnerships. She also noted that this is not something to be rushed and should be tailored to the specific partners at the table. She also stated that all partners involved should benefit. She said that to include stakeholders, they leverage partnerships and expertise to deepen their impact. They also seek to provide incentives to engage in economic and youth development work. She hopes Jacksonville becomes the "City that Mentors." She closed by stating that mentorship is good for young people, the economy, and society.

CM Amaro stated he was impressed by Ms. McWhite's story and noted that she returned to be a mentor; he asked how frequently that occurs. Ms. Alford said they were starting to see more mentees returning as mentors and noted that employers were communicating with them when they hire program participants. CM Amaro asked if they have as many volunteers as they need. She said they could always use more volunteers, but noted that Beyond School Walls is their fastest-growing program. She said that beyond the

program, they have a higher need for mentors, especially for their male participants, 90 percent of whom are on a waitlist.

Chair Freeman noted that he did not notice any of the trades represented among the program's partners and asked why. Ms. Alford stated that the most significant barrier is supervision and safety considerations. She said they are talking with Miller Electric about partnerships, and are always interested in including more options.

Committee Discussions

Chair Freeman transitioned to the discussion portion by presenting two guiding questions:

1. Do these funding priorities feel like the right mix to make the biggest difference for young people?
2. How do we make sure the programs we fund don't stop at high school—and that they work together instead of in silos?

CM Pittman noted that the organizations present seemed to be tracking with the Committee's concerns. She also said that funding is always a concern and didn't want a scenario in which money was available to initiate but not enough to continue. She also wondered what could be done to ensure that students remain in or return to Jacksonville, should they go elsewhere for education or training. Chair Freeman said it was up to the City Council to commit to workforce development to ensure the City is one that young people return to.

CM Amaro, responding to the first question, said that these programs were the right mix to make the biggest difference for young people. He said that these were just part of the equation, however, and noted that the apprenticeship piece was missing. He said these programs should be continued but other programs need to be considered. Chair Freeman pointed out the overlap in his own work as a recruiter who sees the need for soft skills, even in the trades. He said his big takeaway from the presentations was the need for community partnership and encouraged those in the audience to consider that in their work.

CM Pittman encouraged looking at the diversity of programming and was reminded of the Cultural Council, which has tiers of awards for different types of organizations. She also noted the value of having community partners come to this Committee to share their needs. Chair Freeman said that his goal was for small organizations to have the support to expand their work.

Next Steps

Chair Freeman provided the next steps for the Committee:

- Summarize discussion themes and draft recommendations to be incorporated into RFP framework
- Continue to refine funding allocations and align policy direction
- The upcoming meeting will focus on Recreation Access and Safe Community Spaces.

Public Comment

Shamari Jones, from the Mayor's Young Leadership Advisory Council, emphasized that young people should be part of the conversation and encouraged the Committee to include them in its work.

Meeting adjourned: 4:58 p.m.

Minutes: Brandon Russell, Council Research
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