

INTERMEDIARY ORIGIN STORY

# CITYWORKS DC

Keys to Scale



CITYWORKS 

 ESG | Education  
Strategy  
Group

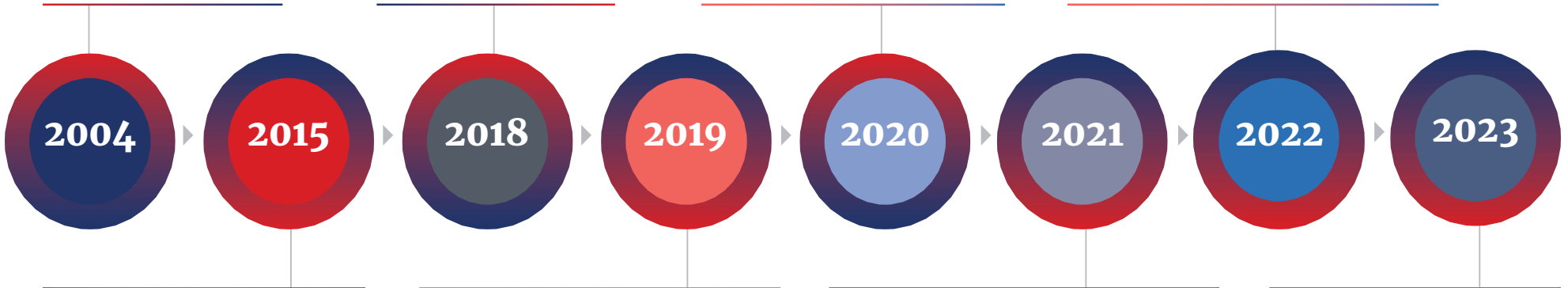
# CityWorks DC

Jennie Niles founds the E.L. Haynes Public Charter School in DC for 138 PK-2nd graders with plans to grow to 1,100+ PK-12th graders, focusing on getting all students successfully to and through college.

Niles becomes an entrepreneur-in-residence at CityBridge Education, where she explores innovative career pathway programming including apprenticeship as well as flexible, affordable, high support postsecondary models.

CityWorks DC launches CareerWise DC, an affiliate of the CareerWise programs in Colorado and New York that offer three-year modern apprenticeship programs for young people, in business operations and information technology with six employers and four public high schools.

Through Hire Local DC, regional construction companies establish DC Builds DC, an employer-led Next Generation Sector Partnership focused on building a local talent pipeline into the construction sector. With over 40 member companies in DC Builds DC, Hire Local DC is set to launch a second sector partnership with hospitality employers in 2024.



As Deputy Mayor for Education for the District of Columbia, Niles sees employers who are desperate for talent rarely hiring graduates of public schools in DC into their high-demand, high-wage jobs and no way to track this data systematically.

Niles leads a group of 10 educators who represent schools serving three-quarters of DC's high school population on a trip to Switzerland to observe the high-performing Swiss education-to-employment system. The group returns from the trip energized to build a youth apprenticeship program in DC and CityBridge Education incubates CityWorks DC.

CityWorks DC partners with the Federal City Council and the DC Chamber of Commerce to launch Hire Local DC, which aims to build stronger local, diverse talent pipelines to the high-wage, high-demand careers in the DMV, and starts the Citywide Talent Pipeline Working Group to foster collaboration, set common goals, and create the enabling conditions for talent pipeline development with leaders from government, education, business, and philanthropy.

As the District designs and prepares to launch a new P20W data system and CareerWise DC plans for expansion into finance, healthcare, and federal service, CityWorks DC is a leading collaborator in the DC education-to-employment ecosystem that has deep partnerships across education and training partners, private and public employers, philanthropy, and research entities.



# What is CityWorks DC?

CityWorks DC is a work-based learning intermediary focused on re-shaping the landscape of education and career development opportunities for DC youth and young adults of color to improve their social and economic mobility. To do this, CityWorks DC is committed to initiatives that reform the employment and education system through: 1) launching innovative programs, e.g., modern youth apprenticeship (CareerWise DC), career coaching (Embark), and flexible, affordable, high support postsecondary programming (ASU Local DC); and 2) providing policy, coalition-building, data systems, and advocacy, e.g., employer-led sector partnerships (Hire Local DC), P20W data systems (Early Career Outcome Survey & DC's Education Through Employment Data System), and citywide planning and engagement (Citywide Talent Pipeline Working Group), to accelerate systems change on behalf of improving the career outcomes of DC's young people. CityWorks DC especially focuses on young people from historically marginalized groups and those from low-income households to help them obtain credentials and certifications, get paid work experience, and build networks of professionals.

CityWorks DC's founder and partners see the organization as a bridge-builder and a network-builder, serving multiple purposes: helping young people access multiple career opportunities that pay well and helping industry leaders develop robust talent pipelines, all for the purpose of investing in the economic development of the region.



# The Beginning

In 2004, Jennie Niles founded a public charter school called the E.L. Haynes Public Charter School in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington, DC. Originally located above a CVS store and serving 138 students from pre-K through second grade, the school eventually grew to include a pre-K–12th grade student population with over 1,100 students. Niles attributes much of the generative thinking that led to CityWorks DC to the efforts to solve challenges faced by the founding E.L. Haynes students as they grew into high school students, then college students, and then into their early careers.

Niles left E.L. Haynes in 2015 to serve as the deputy mayor of education for the District of Columbia. Working with the Mayor and other deputy mayors, Niles had the opportunity to inform the big picture regarding what was happening in DC around the economy, education and workforce systems, and young people. She observed that while there were often great job opportunities available for young people in DC, those jobs were rarely going to the young people graduating from DC public high schools.

**“In many ways, I’ve spent my career tackling the challenges faced by our founding group of students as they’ve grown up—starting with making sure they’re successful in elementary school, then middle school, and then high school. But I saw that that wasn’t enough—our graduates needed pathways that get them from high school to a family-sustaining career, which is what led us to start CityWorks DC.”**

Jennie Niles  
President and CEO,  
CityWorks DC



In addition to Niles' experience during her time with the public charter school and as deputy mayor, she and others were well aware of DC's unique set of circumstances with respect to its economy, workforce development, and education system. DC is a unique entity within the United States; it is not a state, but functions like a county and a municipality and a state. DC is a talent magnet; people come to the city from all over the country for job opportunities. And the wealth disparities in DC are extreme. According to a [2022 report](#) from the Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy, white households have 81 times the wealth of Black households in DC and 22 times the wealth of LatinX households.

When Niles became an entrepreneur-in-residence at CityBridge Education, she was able to incubate and build CityWorks DC: an organization to create multiple pathways for young people to access the high-wage, high-demand jobs in DC. One of the most important features of CityWorks DC was to ensure the availability of a range of pathways for young people, so that they weren't forced into the overly narrow path of going to college, accumulating debt, and then facing more barriers to achieving economic security.

**“I’ve known many of the kids from E.L. Haynes since they were four years old.**

**I saw them grow up, go to college, get a degree, and come back to DC, but they hadn’t been able to access career-building jobs while in college. After graduation, they were applying for high-wage, high-demand jobs which required ‘relevant work experience.’ Unfortunately, the jobs they got to earn money while in school—typically in food service and retail—didn’t count, so they weren’t competitive for those positions. They’d done everything ‘right’, but were still at a disadvantage.”**

Jennie Niles  
President and CEO,  
CityWorks DC



# Learning and Adapting

During the time that Niles spent as entrepreneur-in-residence at CityBridge Education, she had the opportunity to broaden her experience beyond the K-12 education system and visit programs dedicated to youth development, career pathways, and innovative postsecondary programs. This period of witnessing what was happening around the country around career pathways for young people culminated in her trip with 10 other education leaders from the DC public school system to learn about how other countries like Switzerland were approaching talent development.

The visits to other organizations in the United States and in other countries energized both Niles and others to invest in updated versions of what are commonly known as youth apprenticeship programs. Niles and others wanted to amplify the unique aspects of apprenticeship programs, such as giving young people opportunities to master the competencies of an in-demand, high-wage occupation by engaging in deep learning in workplace settings while building skills—technical as well as those often categorized as “professional” skills, such as interpersonal communication—while also building social capital and gaining industry-valued credentials that would catapult them into their future careers.

**“I don’t necessarily think of CityWorks DC as just a pathways organization. It is that, but it is also an economic development partner. When I describe this work of bringing together industry leaders and education leaders and government, I sometimes use the metaphor of an iceberg—what most people see is just the tip, but there is so much going on underneath that needs to be understood and dealt with. If you don’t work across systems and sectors to build the types of relationships and networks that CityWorks DC has, then your iceberg just becomes little ice cubes, scattered everywhere but not really adding up to much.”**

Francie Genz  
Founder and CEO,  
Institute for Networked  
Convening



**“CityWorks DC really gets it, when it comes to understanding the level of network-building and space-making needed to actually create more opportunities for young people in DC. They are masterful at knowing which partners to bring in, and where, and when; for example, the program DC Builds DC not only required deep commitment from the construction industry sector, you also need the education leaders and the job training sector. And CityWorks DC really reflects an understanding of the root causes and myriad opportunities and challenges that exist as part of this work. Many other models don’t succeed because they define the questions and challenges too narrowly, and they don’t do enough to foster collective, committed action between the different sectors. ”**

**Francie Genz  
Founder and CEO,  
Institute for Networked  
Convening**

While CityWorks DC was still in its start-up phase, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in March of 2020. The resultant disruption to schools, business sectors, and people’s lives presented both a crisis and an opportunity for organizations like CityWorks DC to address longstanding structural questions, like how high schools could create more flexible schedules and graduation requirements to allow young people to explore different opportunities like youth apprenticeship and college. In addition, CityWorks DC needed to cultivate more buy-in from leaders from different sectors so they would invest and sustain in pathways work over the long term. For Francie Genz, the founder and CEO of an organization that helped CityWorks DC launch a program with the construction sector, CityWorks has the capability to work across many different sectors and systems.

While many career pathways organizations are focused on creating more work-based learning opportunities in partnership with local businesses, the challenge lies not only in creating these programs and initiatives, but in sustaining them over time. A durable partner organization tightly aligned to the needs of employers is critical in building connections across the many diffuse industries and sectors within a particular city or region. CityWorks DC is seen as one of the few organizations that can create the space and the infrastructure to build and sustain alignment among leaders from various sectors.



# Strength through Partnership

In the fall of 2020, amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, CityWorks DC launched CareerWise DC, a three-year modern youth apprenticeship program in IT and business operations starting in high school, in partnership with six employers and four public high schools. CityWorks DC is the DC affiliate for CareerWise USA and has expanded beyond IT and business operations to other high-paying, high-skill industries.

In 2021, CityWorks DC joined forces with the Federal City Council (FC2), a local business-oriented nonprofit, and the DC Chamber of Commerce to launch an initiative called Hire Local DC and released [\*The Case for Creating a Local Talent Pipeline in the District of Columbia\*](#) by the DC Policy Center. In early 2022, CityWorks DC and FC2 applied to the U.S. Department of Commerce for a \$25 million Good Jobs Challenge grant that sought to spur the creation of talent pipelines into “good” jobs—i.e., jobs that would create economic mobility for employees, supply businesses with talent, and grow the local economy—in construction, hospitality, and information technology simultaneously. While ultimately Hire Local DC was not awarded the grant, Niles describes the outcome as a blessing in disguise and has

**“When [CityWorks DC & FC2] submitted the Good Jobs Challenge proposal, we had gathered 60 letters of support from employers, government agencies, non-profits, and community organizations throughout the city. We’d built momentum to make change and knew we had a lot of people here who agreed on what should happen next. And we felt that DC is perhaps a small enough place so that we can take on complex systems change with multiple players and make it happen.”**

Jennie Niles  
President and CEO,  
CityWorks DC

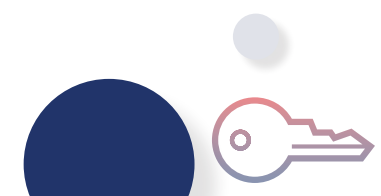




used the proposal as the roadmap to create sector partnerships with different employers, by industry, that intentionally create a talent pipeline of DC talent from high school to good jobs for those employers.

CityWorks DC has also taken key steps to address the city’s need to collect and leverage longitudinal data in support of stronger educational and workforce outcomes. Through an intense six-month consulting project in partnership with DC government, the publication of [\*Measuring Early Career Outcomes in DC\*](#) by the DC Policy Center, and participation in the Early Career Outcome Survey with Bain & Company, CityWorks DC laid the groundwork for the Mayor to fund the establishment of a P20W data system to track youth education and employment outcomes in the city’s budget for \$3.5M and sits within DC government’s new Education Through Employment Pathway Office. With direct input from employers, parents, educators, community members, and young people, this system will build better connections across agencies and ultimately better understanding of program effectiveness; in particular, a better understanding of early career outcome data is desirable to LEAs to inform their decision-making as well as to individual DC residents—especially students and parents—who will use it to help chart their futures.

Alongside these specific efforts, CityWorks DC has been coordinating and convening leaders from government, nonprofit, and private partners at least a half dozen times each year to accelerate the development of an employer-driven, equitable, local talent pipeline that integrates the work of key players in DC. This body, called the Citywide Talent Pipeline Working Group, has seen success in developing collaboratively a Talent Pipeline Toolkit now used by government, nonprofit, and employer partners, tackling graduation requirement barriers by identifying a total of 21 courses that can count for multiple high school graduation requirements; publishing resources like Job Readiness Rubrics and Protocols for Construction and Hospitality Sector job candidates and a Summary of Wraparound Support Providers; providing feedback to OSSE on its Graduation Profile and High School Graduation Requirement Redesign Process; and completing a landscape analysis of the Enabling Conditions and associated deliverables needed in DC to establish, strengthen, and sustain a strong, diverse local talent pipeline.



# Opportunities and Challenges Ahead

Systems and sectors can become entrenched in their own modes of thinking and operating. Lack of connection between different systems and sectors, in the pathways space, can lead to many young people facing formidable barriers to accessing much-needed education and employment opportunities that, in turn, present lifelong challenges to achieving economic stability and career fulfillment.

CityWorks DC serves as the connective tissue between different systems and sectors and cultivates and strengthens relationships that help create more opportunities for young people in DC. Tanya Borachi, who is now with the Federal City Council (the partner organization with CityWorks DC on Hire Local DC, the construction sector partnership), remembers feeling an initial sense of doubt that CityWorks DC could serve as a trusted convener of employers, non-profits, and government agencies when first hearing of them when she was in her former role as an local education agency administrator for college and career preparedness.

**“When you work in the K-12 education system, you get a lot of back and forth about what government or other funders are going to do next when it comes to job readiness, continuing technical education, career development. But then I realized, when I started working with CityWorks DC [in her previous role], that they really do work across all of these different systems and sectors. The organization’s DNA is oriented around what is brought to them as a need, as a problem to be solved. And at the center of this work is holding all the things that could be valuable for a young person to do while in high school or after high school—what doors could be opened, what options could be there.”**

Tanya Borachi,  
Senior Associate  
Workforce and Education,  
Federal City Council



For Borachi, one of the biggest challenges still facing CityWorks DC and DC as a whole is how to gather enough longitudinal data that shows what happens to young people over time. For many who work in the pathways or pathways-adjacent fields, not just in DC, the pandemic interrupted efforts to build the evidence base about what types of support young people were getting and where they were ending up in terms of education and/or employment. For DC, where the wealth disparities are extreme and so many employees are from places other than DC, this feels like an especially critical area to tackle. CityWorks DC and its many partners are eager to see more young people from DC, especially young people of color and those from low-income households, get hired into the highly desirable, well-paying jobs that exist in the area. As Borachi puts it, CityWorks DC needs to keep providing “continuous building blocks” for more young people to succeed and be able to contribute to the economic health of the DC region.

For Genz, CityWorks DC faces a challenge of resources and sustainability that is unique to the DC region. In her work with the Institute for Networked Communities, Genz has worked with many different economic development entities across the country and in other places, where the career pathways work is supported at the state level. Because Washington, DC is not a state, accessing funding for ambitious multi-sector partnerships is a challenge for CityWorks DC. “CityWorks DC has absolutely demonstrated the willingness to hold the big picture for what it means to look at the DC region as a whole—its young people, its economic development and prosperity, the local leadership,” she said. “They help so many different sector leaders understand where it is that they fit in, when it comes to making system change that really matters for young people’s economic mobility. But because it’s DC, it feels like a constant challenge to sustain and grow this work.”

For Niles, CityWorks DC’s greatest challenges are also its greatest opportunities. Critical work remains to mobilize employers and build capacity among strategic partners (educators, training providers, community members, government leaders, etc.) to accelerate the collaborative actions needed to develop a high-performing education and training system for DC residents. This will require continued attention, communication, problem solving, and learning around efforts that are currently nascent, all roles that benefit from a nimble, innovative, and connected intermediary. However, since the founding of CityWorks DC, the District has made considerable strides in establishing the foundation and improving the conditions for this work to be successful, and CityWorks DC is poised to be a key player in DC’s continued growth and ultimately, its success in changing outcomes for DC’s youth and young adults.

