



Tree Equity Handbook

A Practical Guide to Closing the Canopy Gap Between Neighborhoods

ACTIVITY 5.5

→ Building the Future Through K-12 Engagement

Toolkit 5: Develop a Workforce

Issued November 2025



Activity Map

→ [Networking for Workforce Development](#)

→ [Workforce Review](#)

→ [Workforce Operations Action Planning](#)

→ [Workforce Trainings](#)

Building the Future Through K-12 Engagement

Activity 5.5: Building the Future Through K-12 Engagement

Toolkit 5

Develop a Workforce

Urban forests depend on a skilled workforce to thrive. With an increasingly urgent need to close the Tree Equity gap, this moment offers an opportunity to recruit and train a new generation of urban forestry professionals who better reflect the communities where Tree Equity is most needed.

Start by building a network of workforce partners, then assess your community's workforce landscape to identify concrete actions your coalition can take to build awareness, train workers and cultivate a robust ecosystem of Tree Equity professionals.

Building the Future Through K-12 Engagement



Overview & Basic Steps

The long-term strength of the Tree Equity workforce depends on inspiring and preparing the next generation. Building a sustainable pipeline means starting early by sparking curiosity, introducing youth to green careers and connecting their learning to community well-being. Engaging K–12 students and Opportunity Youth (young people ages 16–24 who are not currently in school or working) creates intergenerational impact as they share knowledge with families, inspire reentry pathways and strengthen community-wide awareness of green workforce opportunities.

Before starting this activity, you might need:

- A strong understanding of potential partners and collaborators → [Activity 5.1](#)
- Review existing K-12 and Opportunity Youth programs from your Workforce Review → [Activity 5.2](#)

Suggested Time: 1–2 weeks

Level of Difficulty: Moderate–Difficult

Participants: Career pathways professionals, K–12 educators and administrators, Opportunity Youth program coordinators

Instructions

- 1 Identify partners already engaging K–12 and Opportunity Youth (e.g., schools, youth groups, cultural groups, CTE centers). Evaluate reach and mission alignment using the **K–12 Partner Alignment Worksheet** → [page 5](#)
- 2 Select activities that introduce green careers using the **Green Careers and Activities Library** → [page 7](#), or create customized opportunities with the **Design Your Own Activities Worksheet** → [page 8](#)
- 3 Match activities and messaging that resonate with youth, educators and mentors using the **Activity Match Worksheet** → [page 11](#)
- 4 Integrate intergenerational experiences, such as family tree-planting days or career panels featuring early-career professionals or Opportunity Youth graduates

After you complete this activity:

- Coordinate next steps with schools and Opportunity Youth programs (e.g., plan pilots, funding, or curriculum integration).
- Create feedback loops with educators and partners to refine engagement.
- Explore pathways that connect K–12 and Opportunity Youth experiences to pre-apprenticeships, internships or community college programs, bridging awareness to employment and supporting long-term Tree Equity goals.

TOOLKIT 5: Develop a Workforce | Activity 5 – WORKSHEET 1

Identify Impactful K–12 Partners

The future urban forestry and Tree Equity workforce pipeline relies on trusted partnerships with organizations that already engage youth. Schools, after-school programs, youth-serving nonprofits, cultural centers and Opportunity Youth programs all serve as critical entry points to reach students and young adults who can grow into the next generation of green professionals.

This exercise will help you prioritize partners that expand your impact, especially in underrepresented communities, and clarify next steps for relationship-building.

Partner alignment approach:

1. List current or potential partners in education and youth development. Look for groups such as school districts, after-school programs, STEM clubs, cultural centers, faith-based youth groups, and organizations serving Opportunity Youth.
2. Assess their influence and reach: What communities do they serve, and how big is their audience? Prioritize those who already have trust and credibility in underrepresented communities.
3. Evaluate alignment with your workforce goals, such as interest in green careers, community environmental initiatives, equity in education or hands-on/experiential learning opportunities.
4. Map next steps, such as scheduling an introductory meeting or designing a lesson or activity that will appeal to this partner.

Sample Worksheet

Potential Partner	Current Relationship	Audience and Reach	Alignment With Workforce Goals	Next Steps
Local middle school STEM club	New contact	50 students, mostly BIPOC youth	High alignment: STEM/green careers	Schedule introductory meeting

Fillable worksheet on next page.

K-12 Partner Alignment Worksheet

Potential Partner	Current Relationship	Audience and Reach	Alignment With Workforce Goals	Next Steps



TOOLKIT 5: Develop a Workforce | Activity 5 – WORKSHEET 2

Develop Green Career Lessons and Activities

With the right partners in mind, consider *how* to make green careers visible, relatable and exciting to young people. Get started with our small library of ideas for lessons and activities. The goal is to help students and Opportunity Youth understand that environmental work is both meaningful and attainable.

Design for maximum impact.

- **Use structured resources:** The [Tree Equity Curriculum](#) offers lessons and sample activities that help students and Opportunity Youth connect environmental learning to family and community well-being.
- **Feature relatable role models:** Invite BIPOC, women and early-career professionals who reflect local diversity.
- **Incorporate hands-on, visual learning:** Demonstrations, planting days and field visits bring abstract concepts to life.
- **Tailor by age and stage:**
 - Elementary/Middle School: Introduce nature, science and community stewardship.
 - High School: Offer project-based learning, job shadowing or service-learning projects.
 - Opportunity Youth: Provide paid internships, pre-apprenticeships or career exploration workshops.
- **Think long-term:** Build pathways — such as summer jobs, bridge programs or pre-apprenticeships — that extend K–12 engagement into young adulthood.
- **Connect families:** Encourage youth to share lessons with parents, creating an intergenerational bridge to Tree Equity awareness and potential adult reentry or workforce participation.

Understand educator needs.

- **Align with standards:** Connect to NGSS, Common Core or Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways.
- **Create ready-to-use materials:** Short, flexible lessons that fit existing units or after-school settings.
- **Ground in local context:** Use local canopy data, climate challenges, and employers to make learning relevant.
- **Clarify pathways:** Help students see how coursework connects to tangible jobs, certifications and mentorship opportunities.

Green Career Lessons and Activity Library

Activity	Age Group	Activity Description	Community Benefit	TE Curriculum Reference Page
Take-Home Family Interview	All ages	Interview a family member about nature, trees or climate change and share community values about green spaces.	Parents reflect on their relationship to trees and green spaces.	Lesson 5: Trailblazer Activity (p. 48)
Poster or PSA Challenge	Elementary/middle school	Design posters, videos or social media messages encouraging local tree planting or climate action.	Amplifies youth voices and inspires community pride and awareness through school exhibits or online sharing.	Lesson 3: Extended Learning Activity (p. 21)
“Tree Heroes” Project	Elementary/Middle school	Interview someone in a green career and design a poster about them.	Builds early awareness of careers and celebrate local “heroes.”	Lesson 2: A Career That’s Right for Me (p. 15)
Adopt-a-Tree Program	Elementary/Middle	Students adopt a tree near school, measure growth and record seasonal changes.	Builds a personal connection to nature.	Lesson 4: Introduction to Tree Equity Score (p. 32)
Tree Planting Project	Elementary/Middle	Students participate in a tree planting.	Builds civic awareness and participation.	Lesson 4: Run of Show Template & Greening Event Planning (p. 44)
Discussion: “What Interests You in a Green Career?”	Middle/High school	Which parts of environmental work excite you most (e.g., helping people, technology, working outdoors)?	Students discuss career interests with parents.	Lesson 1: Green Jobs Skills (Part I) (p. 8)
Career-to-Interest Matching Activity	Middle/High school	How do your passions (art, science, teamwork, etc.) connect to roles in urban forestry?	Normalizes environmental work as rewarding and practical.	Lesson 2: Green Jobs Skills (Part II) (p. 14)
Neighborhood Tree Walk	Middle/High school	A green professional leads a neighborhood Tree Equity tour, noting types of trees, shade, condition and who benefits.	Helps families see trees as community assets and sparks conversations at home about neighborhood improvement.	Lesson 4: Tree Equity Score Exploration (p. 32)
“Forester For a Day” Shadowing Opportunity	High school	Students help out a professional with monitoring, nursery work or other tree care.	Students and parents learn about day-to-day urban forestry work.	Lesson 4: Career Personality Group Roles (p. 30)
Green Career Speaker Family Night	High school	Students and their families hear from professionals in the field.	Families and peers see environmental work as inclusive and practical.	Lesson 5: Career Portfolio Presentation (p. 51)
Mini Climate Data Lab	High school	Students measure temperature in different neighborhoods to understand how trees reduce heat, then share findings with city staff.	Links science learning with lived experience and teaches students about advocacy.	Lesson 4: Tree Equity Score Mapping (p. 32)
Green Career Summer Internship	High school	Create a summer internship program with a local nonprofit or city department.	Students from diverse backgrounds connect with professionals for two-way learning.	Lesson 5: Building a Career Path Worksheet (p. 53)

Design Your Own Activities – Worksheet



Activity	Age Group	Activity Description	Community Benefit

TOOLKIT 5: Develop a Workforce | Activity 5 – WORKSHEET 3

Connect to K–12 Audiences

Engaging youth requires a different approach than engaging adult jobseekers or policymakers. Young people respond best to hands-on experience, simple and relatable messages, and role models who reflect their communities. Educators, meanwhile, are motivated by tools that support learning standards, career readiness and real-world application.

This exercise will help your organization adapt messages and activities to resonate with both students and teachers, ensuring that your outreach is not only engaging but also educational and aligned with classroom needs.

Define your audience.

- Define exactly *who* will use your lesson or activity. Consider age, gender, education level, interests, school characteristics and community context.
- Define your audience by *who they are* and *what motivates them*. For example, “high school juniors in career and technical programs looking for stable job opportunities.”

Match messaging and activities to youth motivations.

- Emphasize action, belonging and purpose; show how these relate to community pride, climate solutions, and teamwork.
- Use simple, relatable language and visuals.
- Tie lessons to lived experiences and aspirations.
- Highlight role models who look like and come from their communities.
- Address barriers to participation (transportation, access, awareness) and spark interest through real-world projects or paid learning experiences.

Match messaging and activities to educator needs.

- Ensure activities align with state and national standards.
- Integrate with existing lesson plans or after-school programs.
- Offer professional development or co-teaching opportunities for educators using your materials.
- Provide data and storytelling tools that educators can use to demonstrate the real-world relevance of Tree Equity to parents and administrators.

Sample Worksheet

Audience	What Motivates Them?	Message That Resonates	Possible Activity Match
Middle school students	Fun, hands-on experiences	“You can help the planet and your neighborhood.”	Tree planting and career spotlight talk
Teachers	Curriculum support, career exploration tools	“This connects to your STEM standards.”	Adapt Tree Equity Curriculum lesson plan to align with core or state standards
Youth workforce development organizations	Connecting youth and their families with internships or part-time employers, K-12 educators and other essential resources like food and housing assistance	“Urban forestry is a viable career, and we can help you pursue it.”	Local green career employer lists and connections

Fillable worksheet on next page.

Workforce participants in the WorkForest Initiative inspect leaf health in Austin, TX.



Sidney Glasshoff/American Youthworks

Activity Match Worksheet



Audience	What Motivates Them?	Message That Resonates	Possible Activity Match



Activity 5.5: Building the Future Through K-12 Engagement

Toolkit 5: Develop a Workforce

Written by:

Tia Washington
Yelitza Garcia
Julia Twichell

Reviewed by:

Vikram Krishnamurthy
Ian Leahy

Suggested citation:

American Forests. “Activity 5.5: Building the Future Through K-12 Engagement.”

Tree Equity Handbook Toolkit 5: Develop a Workforce.

Version 1. 2024. Washington, DC: American Forests.

<https://treeequityhandbook.org/tree-equity-handbook/develop-a-workforce/#activity-building-the-future-through-k-12-engagement>



©2025 American Forests
americanforests.org