



**ISSUE BRIEF** | Center for Education Opportunity & Center for 1776

# **POLICY ACTIONS TO EXPAND PATHWAYS FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES**

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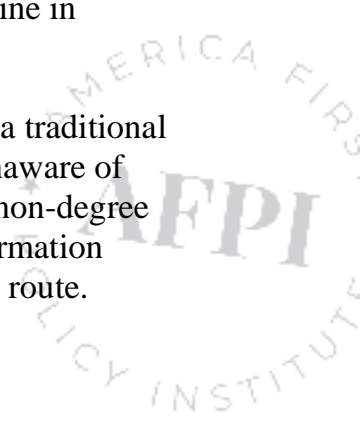
## **TOPLINE POINTS**

- While many lucrative pathways are available to high school graduates, most continue to opt for college degrees, including some who are not well served by a college education.
- Not all four-year degrees offer a high return on investment, and some students may be better served by a trade school certificate that prepares them for skilled jobs at a lower cost.
- A need for skilled workers has caused a shift in hiring, and there are more opportunities than ever for students with certificates or licenses. In some cases, trade schools can offer a higher return on investment than four-year degrees.
- States and the private sector should expand options for high school graduates by implementing alternative programs, better informing students and parents, and de-stigmatizing technical careers.

## **Introduction**

While college has traditionally been seen as the primary pathway to career success, recent trends indicate a growing recognition that it is not the only option. College enrollment has experienced a decline since 2012, suggesting that individuals are becoming more aware of the diverse career paths available and the value of alternative education options. This shift in perspective aligns with a recent Gallup poll revealing a 21% decline in Americans' confidence in higher education since 2015 ([Brenan, 2023](#)).

Despite the availability of viable and often more cost-effective alternatives to a traditional four-year degree, many high school students and their families may remain unaware of these options due to a lack of awareness and societal stigmas associated with non-degree careers. It is crucial to provide students and families with comprehensive information about all available options, extending beyond the traditional bachelor's degree route.



Numerous alternative education and career paths offer comparable or even greater rewards while placing less financial burden on individuals and families.

To further emphasize the importance of exploring diverse career paths, it is worth noting that total college enrollment in 2023 stands at 16.9 million ([National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023](#)), a decrease from the peak enrollment of 20.6 million in 2012 ([Korhonen, 2020](#)). This decline underscores the growing recognition that a college degree is not a prerequisite for achieving career goals.

States should continue to develop and invest in alternative pathways for students graduating from high school, and post-secondary advising should expand beyond a one-dimensional focus on traditional two- and four-year colleges. High schools should present students with the various available pathways and make them aware that their options are expanding. This would allow students to thrive, save money, and contribute productively to an evolving economy that needs skilled workers more than ever.

Increasing the number of students who go beyond a high school degree to pursue trade or technical school, apprenticeship programs, or other work-based learning opportunities will help meet the high demand for skilled workers and increase median annual earnings. Virtually all industries are experiencing labor shortages right now ([Ferguson, 2022](#)), particularly in skilled trades like plumbing, carpentry, and electrical work, not to mention the ever-growing demand for qualified IT and construction workers ([Irwin, 2021](#)). The changing labor market mandates alternative pathways and increased awareness for high schoolers, as current mechanisms are not sufficient to fully inform students and families.

### **Current High School Graduation Pathways**

The current mechanisms by which students learn about career pathways are largely confined to the college preparatory sphere. High school counselors and advisors are designated to guide students through college and career decisions, but these professionals often have limited time and resources and are unable to address the needs of all students. Some experts say college counselors focus on college entrance exams and college choice. They tend to encourage students to pursue community service, extracurricular activities, and high grades ([Paolini, 2019](#)). While these are worthwhile pursuits, they are difficult for some students, particularly those who are not academically inclined, to fulfill. Many other pathways do not pose such comprehensive requirements, but students are not always told that.

While guidance counselors seem to believe that providing students with information on traditional careers and pathways will prepare them for post-secondary education and the workforce, broadening the scope of guidance to include ongoing support, mentorship, and career counseling could further empower students to make informed decisions aligned



with their interests, strengths, and aspirations. Most high schools have at least one on-site college counselor to help determine which colleges to apply to and to help in forming those applications. Unfortunately, not nearly enough counselors are available to serve all the students' needs. According to the College Board, the national average student-to-counselor ratio is 350:1. When high schools have more than 2,000 students, that ratio is closer to 500:1 ([The College Board, 2012](#)).

Not only are there too few counselors available to provide tailored attention to all students but in some studies, the availability of counselors has been associated with more students choosing college instead of alternative pathways ([Hurwitz & Howell, 2013](#)). Having a sufficient number of counselors in a school does not guarantee more options being presented to students, as student-counselor conversations often focus on how to afford a four-year college degree.

Discussions often center around financial aid, which 85% of undergraduates receive ([National Center of Education Statistics, 2020](#)). College counselors often teach students how to fill out FAFSA (Federal Student Aid) forms and find scholarship opportunities for four-year college, but there is little, if any, evidence that they spend much time presenting other options, such as trade school or apprenticeships that may be a better fit, and more cost-effective, for some students. Focusing only on four-year institutions and degrees has consequences for our youth and our economy, but also for parents.

Parents need more information about options available for their children and improved communication with counselors. A 2021 Gallup survey found that 46% of parents would prefer not to send their children to a four-year college ([Barshay, 2021](#)), and yet few mechanisms are in place to inform parents about alternative career pathways. A survey conducted by XQ Institute found that 67% of students felt high school was not preparing them for a future career, and 93% of parents, teachers, and other non-students said high school was not doing enough to prepare students for careers ([XQ Institute, n.d.](#)). It is important that communication among parents, counselors, and students ensures that each party fully understands available pathways. Parents should attend college counseling meetings with their children, conduct their own research, and support their children in exploring varied options.

Many employers have recognized the benefits of pathways outside of a four-year degree. Several employers are “suspending the use of degree completion as a proxy” and focusing more on skills-based hiring. More broadly, 10 U.S. governors have issued executive orders that remove degree requirements for many public sector jobs, acknowledging that a four-year degree is not necessary to serve in government ([National Governors Association, 2023](#)).



These developments will begin to reverse “degree inflation”—the practice of companies requiring college degrees for jobs that do not require college-level skills—which suggests that students who pursue a certificate or apprenticeship instead of a degree will have more opportunities than ever ([Fuller et al., 2022](#)). While different programs lead to different starting salaries, the highest-paying trades result in annual mean wages between \$54,200 and \$94,300 ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022](#)). As of 2022, college graduates have an average starting salary of \$55,260, with the higher starting salaries going to technical majors. However, one study found that students have warped perceptions of what salary a college degree will result in, with many listing \$104,000 as their expected starting wage ([Doyle, 2022](#)). Students should be made aware of their options and the realistic financial outcomes posed by each program, whether trade school or four-year college. As jobs and opportunities continue to transform, career pathways and preparation must also.

### **Alternative High School Graduation Pathway Programs**

To prepare students for the rapidly evolving job market, it is crucial for K–12 education to align with the workforce needs of the future. The world is experiencing significant technological advancements and shifting industry demands, which require a workforce equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in these new environments. Aligning education with workforce needs will help students be better prepared for the jobs of the future, reducing the skills gap and increasing their employability. This alignment will equip students with relevant skills, such as problem-solving, digital literacy, and more industry-tailored skills, which are essential for success in the modern workplace. Additionally, aligning education with workforce needs will foster a seamless transition from school to work, as students will have a clear understanding of the skills and qualifications required for their desired careers.

The increased demand for skilled workers has led to new programs for high schoolers to learn about alternative pathways. On July 31, 2018, President Donald J. Trump signed the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) into law. This is a bipartisan law that reauthorized the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins IV). Because of this law, Congress provides \$1.4 billion annually for career and technical education (CTE) programs for youth and adults across the country ([Perkins Collaborative Research Network, 2018](#)). Perkins V has allowed states to create strong programs, with standouts in Delaware and Georgia.

#### *Delaware Programs*

To ensure every high school student in Delaware is college- or career-ready, all public and most charter schools in the state offer a variety of CTE programs through which



students can get real work experience and earn certificates that give them competitive advantages during the hiring and college application processes. The Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) developed the programs with input from local business and industry representatives, high school and post-secondary educators, and community members. These programs are not mandatory for each public school but are available for districts and charter schools to adopt at their discretion. Schools must submit their programs of study to the DDOE for approval before implementing them. Delaware also has special vocational-technical (Vo-tech) schools that focus mainly on career readiness but also on preparation for post-secondary education ([Legislative Council, General Assembly State of Delaware, n.d.](#)).

These programs help students succeed, as shown by their accomplishments in trade school–fueled competitions in recent years. Delaware students have received recognition as national finalists in events related to construction trades, video broadcasting, graphic arts, automotive trades, and more.

Delaware was also honored for having the largest high school CTE membership increase and the largest overall participation percentage increase in CTE programs, demonstrating not only the quality of the state’s programs but also students’ eagerness to pursue trade school over a four-year post-secondary education. Delaware is leading the way in trade school programs and producing high-skilled students who are ready to achieve in the workforce and enjoy a lasting, successful career ([Powers, 2022](#)).

### *Georgia Programs*

The Georgia Department of Education offers a program called Youth Apprenticeship Program, or “YAP,” which combines school-based and work-based learning. The program allows students to start their careers and begin earning money while still in high school. According to the Georgia Department of Education, “the program enables a student to receive a high school diploma, a post-secondary certificate or degree, and certification of industry-recognized competencies applicable to employment in a high-skilled occupation” ([Georgia Dept. of Education, 2023](#)). Students select a career pathway, complete related coursework, and are placed in a related (paid or unpaid) job after the age of 16. According to Georgia Work-Based Learning (WBL), the job placement may also be a part of an academic course sequence, which can help fulfill high school requirements such as Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, English Language Arts, Advanced Academics, World Languages, Fine Arts, JROTC, and Career Technical and Agricultural Education ([Georgia Work-Based Learning, n.d.](#)).



This program allows for tailored guidance and periodic evaluation of students, leading to benefits for all parties. Students are assessed on a regular basis and receive ongoing guidance from mentors until graduation. Earning marketable skills before graduating ensures that students are well-equipped to enter the workforce, often joining their YAP placement companies as full-time employees after graduation. This also reduces company costs for training and recruitment, as these partnering businesses already have a qualified pool of workers from which to choose. School systems participating in the program also benefit from better communication with businesses and industries. They are better able to serve diverse student populations, make education more relevant to students' post-high school experiences, and increase student retention ([Georgia Dept. of Education, 2023](#)).

### *Other States*

YAP programs have also been piloted in Washington, Wisconsin, Colorado, Oregon, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The programs give businesses a chance to fill skill gaps with in-house talent, offer leadership opportunities for current employees, and improve recruitment tactics while allowing students to gain a direct pathway to employment, develop essential skills, and apply in-school learning to the workplace ([Colorado Succeeds, n.d.](#)). When businesses partner with schools to offer work-based learning programs, they are investing in the future of their communities.

New Horizons, an organization operated by the six Peninsula School divisions in Virginia, offers regional educational centers to prepare high school students for college and the workforce ([New Horizons Regional Education Center, n.d.](#)). Centers offer career and technical education, science and technology training, apprenticeship and adult training, and more. Their Career and Education Program provides training to help students transition from high school into professional fields such as construction, automotive, electric, and HVAC. Programs partner with businesses to form a pipeline that channels young people directly into the workforce. Through innovative marketing, such as “signing days,” similar to traditional college commit days, New Horizons helps build excitement around careers in the technical trades.

### **Increasing Awareness of Alternative High School Graduation Pathways**

Several publications help inform high school graduates of their options after high school, a strong example being [Arkansas Next magazine](#). The magazine has an interactive map that allows Arkansas students to view their educational and professional options after graduation, including four-year colleges, two-year colleges, technical schools, and graduate schools ([Arkansas Business Publishing Group, n.d.](#)). The website provides



information about potential career paths and their respective average salaries in the state. With just a few clicks, students can discover that while financial analysts make \$73,000 on average in Arkansas, construction managers make an average of \$76,480. The site also offers [Classroom Activity Guides](#) that can be implemented by teachers. The guides help facilitate necessary discussions on career and financial goals while exposing students to pathways that can help them reach those goals. This kind of information can break down misconceptions, increase transparency, and help students understand that they do not need to pursue a traditional, four-year college degree to be financially successful. Lastly, the website also regularly publishes articles to highlight students pursuing vocational paths, share tips on summer job opportunities, and provide information on how to manage money. *Arkansas Next* is not just available online—it is distributed each fall to every Arkansas public school student in grades 8–12. This is made possible due to a partnership between Arkansas Business Publishing Group and the Arkansas Department of Education.

State departments of education should follow Arkansas’s lead and create similar publications in their states by partnering with the private sector, as public-private partnerships offer more than a state agency can alone. This would help inform and encourage high school students across the nation. These publications are also helpful for students’ families and should be accessible to parents of high schoolers. Parents must be made aware that more cost-effective options do exist and are viable.

College is a big financial investment for families. Tuition prices and fees have consistently risen since 1980, outpacing inflation ([U.S. Department of Education, Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)). According to [U.S. News data](#), the average cost for tuition among ranked private national universities has risen by 134% since 2002. On average, private college costs \$39,723 per year—nearly \$160,000 over four years. This high cost often requires students to take out loans. In 2020–2021, the average borrower who attended college and took on debt had to borrow \$27,400 ([Statista Research Department, 2023](#)). The return on investment of attending college ranged from 13.5% to 35.9% across six demographic groups in 2020 ([Vandenbroucke, 2023](#)). While significant, these returns are not consistent, as there is immense variation across programs, and the return for some programs is negative ([Cooper, 2021](#)). Additionally, the aggregate returns are not unique to four-year degrees, nor is it a guarantee for every college-going student. It is possible to reap similar economic rewards without managing the high tuition costs that come with a four-year college and that are not feasible for all.

Trade schools, on average, cost \$33,000 in total to earn a license or certificate, a price tag that can be largely offset by Pell grants for lower-income families ([Welding, 2021](#)). This



lower cost, however, does not equate to a lower return on investment. A 2020 study found that the average college graduate can expect to get back 15x the cost of the degree from higher earnings over their 45-year working life, while for trade schools, the multiple is 22x ([Housecall Pro, 2020](#)). It is important that students know they do not always need to pay a hefty fee to reap financial benefits.

When parents have access to information showing that alternative pathways can result in impressive economic benefits, they may not feel compelled to make the investment in a four-year college, and fewer students will take out tens of thousands of dollars in student loans. The costs and benefits of college depend on a variety of factors, such as academic programs, but studies show that high schoolers have many viable options to consider besides the traditional bachelor's degree.

To fill in the gaps in counseling, school districts should implement career coaching to show students that college is not always necessary to attain a fulfilling job. In 2022, Mississippi passed the Comprehensive Career and Technical Education Reform Act ([HB 1388](#)), which aims to expose students to alternative pathways and connect them to opportunities outside of the classroom. It requires the state's Office of Workforce Development to implement a career coaching program for middle and high schoolers. The program is inspired by the Toyota Wellspring Education Fund, which has now become a model for the statewide rollout of similar programs. The highly successful program places career coaches in high schools who act as liaisons for students, business, and industry. All career coaches are employed by Toyota and stationed in schools. They educate students on career opportunities at Toyota and help them develop a post-graduation plan, whether that means transitioning to a full-time position at Toyota or using their newly acquired skillset to find other work ([Seid, 2022](#)). Communicating with coaches and gaining exposure to large corporations before graduation gives students a window into the real world.

Similarly, North Carolina established a [Career Coach Program](#) in 2015, and it now serves more than 30,000 students ([NC Community Colleges, 2023](#)). The program partners community colleges with local boards of education across the state, placing career coaches in high schools to help students determine which pathway best suits their needs. Students meet with the coaches on a consistent basis to receive tailored guidance and help identify opportunities like job shadowing. During the 2022–23 academic year, 100 career coaches at 46 community colleges served 30,256 students at 64 schools. The state supports this program with \$5.6 million in funding each year, allowing it to thrive and grow. In the 2022–2023 academic year, North Carolina career coaches served more than 30,000 K–12 students, up 51% from the prior academic year ([NC Community Colleges, 2023](#)). The program has increased career pathway enrollment in options that meet local industry needs, benefiting businesses in need of workers.





Graduating high school students who do choose to attend college should be made aware of early work training opportunities. For example, North Carolina offers the Boeing Thurgood Marshall College Fund Scholar Program, a partnership initiated in 2018 to offer scholarships and careers to selected students ([Dockery, 2023](#)). Typically, college students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities, including agriculture and technical schools, start the internship as freshmen and sophomores to gain exposure to the corporate world. It is important that high school students are aware of college programs like this that offer financial support and work opportunities.

### Conclusion and Summary of Recommendations

To give students exposure to the pathways they can pursue, states and the private sector should consider doing the following:

- States should implement alternative graduation pathways like those in Delaware ([CTE](#)) and Georgia ([YAP](#)) that offer students a chance to pursue career and technical education and training.
- State Departments of Education should partner with the private sector and teachers to produce publications and resources that inform students about career options in the state, like [Arkansas Next](#). School boards should ensure distribution to teachers, students, and parents.
- States should pass legislation like Mississippi [HB 1388](#) to expand counseling options and career opportunities for high schoolers.
- Community colleges and local boards of education should partner to offer opportunities such as the [Career Coach Program](#).
- Schools should promote alternative programs with innovative marketing, such as “signing days,” including on social media platforms to raise awareness.
- Companies of all sizes should initiate scholarship and immersion programs for college students to build professional skill sets while working on their degrees.
- Leaders and policymakers in states should develop close relationships with local businesses in their communities to tailor educational programs and curricula to meet workforce needs.

Expanding options for high school graduates will allow them to embark on meaningful educational journeys that best suit their needs and goals at a lower cost. With expanding career opportunities in many industries, it is time to implement solutions in every state to alleviate shortages and empower students to pursue fulfilling careers.



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