



CENTER FOR THE AMERICAN WORKER

The Case for Alignment of Education and Workforce Systems

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INTRODUCTION

The path to restoring America’s greatness can be paved by strengthening the preparedness of our Nation’s workforce. To that end, America’s public and private sector leaders need to ensure that education and workforce policies are seamlessly aligned and oriented toward the benefit of American workers. In the wake of the economic disruption wrought by COVID-19, there are still 6.4 million people across the United States looking for employment and a record-high 10.1 million job openings ([Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021](#)). To fill these job openings, close the remaining jobs gaps, and return to the historic level of pre-pandemic prosperity under the Trump Administration—when the poverty rate hit an all-time low and unemployment, particularly among those without a high school degree, also bottomed out ([The White House, 2018](#))—the Nation needs a holistic approach to education and workforce. By contrast, before the pandemic, discussions about education and the workforce were mainly focused on the future of work in automation and digitization of information ([Agrawal et al., 2020](#)). Providing perspective on the scale of the issue, a 2017 McKinsey and Company report estimated that 375 million workers, or 14 percent of the global workforce, would need to acquire new skills or switch occupations by 2030 ([Manyika et al. 2017](#)). More recently, they reported that 87 percent of executives surveyed complained about the skill gaps in the workforce, and less than half of them knew how to address the problem ([Cahapay, 2020](#)).

According to Albert Einstein, “The problems that exist today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them” ([Einstein & Prensky, 1987](#)). COVID-19 highlighted limitations of past approaches to workforce and education and created an opportunity for fresh thinking. As a result, state leaders are in a prime position to assess what worked and what fell flat to ensure their workforce is prepared for the job demands of the evolving economic landscape. Because of the constant shifts in economic winds, workers need postsecondary training that enables them to be adaptable, lifelong learners throughout their careers whether they remain in the same line of work or transition across occupations ([Spaulding et al., 2019](#)). According to a [recent IBM study](#) regarding skills, 58 percent of consumers surveyed said they plan to take continuing education courses this year, and 25 percent indicated their reskilling or upskilling goals for 2021 included enrollment in a formal degree or certification program. It is essential to understand the pathways to family-sustaining and rewarding careers and how state leaders can align the education system with labor market needs to ensure a seamless system of academic, technical, and employable skills.

EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE SYSTEM OVERVIEW

Americans hold an average of 12 jobs during their working lives, and nearly one in four change their job or career every 12 months ([Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2019](#)). COVID-19 accelerated the ever-changing job landscape. Traditionally, the linear pathway from education to work in the United States follows a one-way street from kindergarten to elementary school to high school to the workforce, perhaps punctuated by college. While this system served a useful purpose, it has failed to keep up, and it lost alignment with today's businesses and industries ([Zaber, 2019](#)). Companies report that they are finding it difficult to grow and compete without a skilled workforce. The National Federation of Independent Business reported 46 percent of small business owners have unfilled job openings, and 37 percent cannot take on new business ([NFIB, 2021](#)). Despite a record-high share of small businesses owners raising compensation, they continue to struggle to find qualified workers for their open positions ([NFIB, 2021](#)). Furthermore, 93 percent of business owners looking to hire reported few or no qualified applicants for the positions they were trying to fill. An imbalance exists between what employers need and what employees are prepared to provide to their workers.

According to a Georgetown University Center for Education and Workforce Report, 30 million good jobs in the United States did not require a bachelor's degree. The [2017 report](#) defined "good jobs" as those paying at least \$35,000 per year with an average of \$55,000 per year or above. The authors share that there are three pathways to family-sustaining jobs: the high school pathway, the middle-skills pathway, and the bachelor's degree pathway. **Figure 1** below highlights the number of people in good-paying jobs from different educational paths ([Carnevale et al., 2018](#)). Whereas the bachelor's degree pathway is currently dominant, in 1950, only 2 percent of the middle class had a bachelor's degree or higher, and 72 percent had not completed high school ([Carnevale et al., 2018](#)). The mobilization efforts during World War II laid the groundwork for a mass recovery effort that fueled a post-World War II era modernization of work and the shift toward increased education required for employment. The United States increased its workforce and education requirements to coincide with the increase in the creation and use of technology in the workplace. High school-educated workers came to dominate the middle class as the country became a global competitor in the modern economy. By 1980, only 40 percent of the middle class had only a high school diploma, and 38 percent had obtained more than one year of postsecondary education or training.

Figure 1. The high school pathway still accounts for 20 percent of good jobs, the middle-skills pathway accounts for 24 percent, and the BA pathway accounts for 56 percent.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey, 1992–2017*.

Education is the primary method for providing individuals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies for success in the workplace. However, America’s educational system continues to lag behind the needs of employers ([Hansen, 2021](#)). For many young people, the transition from school to work is bumpy due to the misalignment of the education and workforce systems ([Care et al., 2019](#)). While educators are working hard to adopt academic standards, businesses are frustrated by graduates lacking the skills necessary to be employable within their companies. Elevated youth unemployment rates are further evidence of the education-workforce disconnect. Before COVID-19, unemployment among those aged 25 to 54 was only 3 percent, whereas youth (age 16 to 24) had a rate of 8.3 percent. During COVID-19 lockdowns, youth unemployment peaked at 27.4 percent in April of 2020—exceeding the 19.5 percent rate attained during the Great Recession—compared to 12.8 percent for 25-to-54-year-olds ([Inanc, 2021](#)). Besides the immediate paycheck it delivers, employment offers youth one of the first opportunities to learn essential life skills for how to succeed in the workplace, helps youth assess their workplace likes and dislikes, and in some cases, forges a connection with a particular employer that can serve as the basis for building a career. Aligning education and workforce systems is critical to helping youth recover from the lack of opportunity they experienced in entering the workforce. A [McKinsey & Company](#) report, *Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained*, estimated by 2030, 38.6 million Americans would need to retrain for another occupation due to the effects of automation ([2017](#)). With the ongoing advancement of technology and globalization, especially after COVID-19 accelerated the trend, the importance of training and reskilling will continue to grow. To establish the best education-to-workforce pipeline, state leaders, in close partnership with employers, need to align the goals and objectives of education and workforce systems so that students and youth have an opportunity to experience a seamless transition between what they learn in the classroom and what they need to succeed in the workplace.

The four laws listed below play important and complementary roles in educating and training individuals and shaping the current and future workforce, despite significant program complexity and fragmentation. Understanding the intersections and disconnects between these four pieces of legislation can help states strategically coordinate education and workforce, increase efficiency, and ensure a seamless academic, technical, and skills readiness system for successful employment.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

ESSA, which provides funding for public education from kindergarten to 12th grade, requires all students to be taught challenging academic content that prepares them to succeed in college and careers. Schools are required under ESSA to ensure all students graduate from high school with the knowledge, skills, and disposition to succeed in postsecondary education or a career ([2015](#)).

Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V)

Perkins V funds states and other grantees to improve secondary and postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) programs and programs of study that prepare students for the workforce ([2018](#)).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

IDEA ensures all students with disabilities from birth up to 21 years of age have access to a free and appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related

services. These services are designed to meet the unique needs of each student and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living ([2004](#)).

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

WIOA Title I funds the public workforce development system, matching labor market needs with education, training, and support services for youth and adults looking for meaningful employment. WIOA Title II funds adult education and literacy activities for out-of-school youth and adults who lack a high school diploma or proficiency in English ([2014](#)).

WIOA was signed into law in 2014 to replace the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. It aims to facilitate success in the labor market by providing workers access to the education and training needed while also matching employers with a trained workforce. WIOA initiates reforms at the federal, state, and local levels. Through WIOA regulations, policymakers are encouraged to integrate costs across governmental levels, especially at the local level. Compared with the Workforce Investment Act, WIOA places greater emphasis on states incorporating the needs of employers into workforce development planning and implementation. WIOA programs also aim to benefit vulnerable populations, such as people with disabilities, at-risk youth, and dislocated workers.

The federal government currently operates more than 40 workforce development programs spread across 15 agencies. This fragmentation creates an unnecessary bureaucracy and makes it difficult for state and local efforts to meet the needs of the citizens and focus on in-demand skills. However, the idea of combining workforce and education systems is not new. In 2017 President Trump issued a proposal to merge the Department of Education (ED) with the Department of Labor (DOL). The proposal suggested that ED and DOL share a common goal of preparing Americans for success through family-sustaining careers ([The White House, 2018](#)). ED has approximately 4,000 employees with a \$73 billion estimated budget. By comparison, DOL has 15,000 employees and approximately a \$37 billion budget. According to an analysis by the National Skills Coalition, middle-skill jobs account for more than 54 percent of the labor market, and this share will have a tough time growing because only 44 percent of the labor force is trained to the middle-skill level ([Bergson-Shilcock, 2016](#)). As states begin to address the skills gap, it is natural to review the workforce development system and leverage workforce system training funds with money from other federal and state systems. To increase the number of job seekers that have participated in high-quality training programs, more could be done to coordinate the efforts of DOL and ED. Consolidating states' efforts would help to increase the efficiencies for the American worker ([The White House, 2018](#)).

IDEAS FOR ALIGNMENT

Preparing the workforce to have the necessary skills to succeed in the current and future labor force requires active engagement with employers. The stakes are high because businesses' ability to continue producing goods and services depends on their ability to find adequately trained employees. States have a range of opportunities to align education and training activities that support people in accessing skills needed to enter and continue to thrive in the labor force. State leaders and policymakers have an opportunity to look holistically across K-12 education, postsecondary, workforce development, and economic development systems to alleviate barriers for American workers. Aligning goals and

collaborating across sectors will help create inclusive and supportive pathways for people to develop skills, earn credentials, and enter careers.

In 2021, the **Florida** Legislature passed comprehensive legislation, HB1507, that aligns K-12 school systems, community colleges, universities, and workforce agencies in common workforce development goals ([2021](#)). The bill strengthens career navigation and advising support for young people, adult learners, and job seekers. Below are some of the key components of the legislation that directly support students and workers:

- Creates a workforce entry strategy so job seekers can access services from employers or workforce partners in a single case management system.
- Establishes a public, online portal that provides job seekers access to finding jobs that exist, the skills required, how and where to receive those skills, the available services to earn them, program performance details, and economic mobility within the industry they are seeking.
- Implements a Money-Back Guarantee Program where a school district and FCS institution have to pay back tuition if their students cannot find employment within six months of completing the programs.

Policymakers can also support skills-based education and employment infrastructure through competency-based education ([Education Commission of the States, 2017](#)). This framework recognizes an individual's current skills as the primary measure of how much they have learned and their ability to do a job. Students and employees can access competency-based education programs at an affordable cost and work at their own pace. Depending on the program, they can earn a degree or credit upon completion of their program. This innovative education model is designed to help students and workers meet specific skills and competencies that industry leaders, workforce representatives, and faculty approve. Supporting competency-based education and the credits or degrees one can obtain based on prior learning can help learners obtain credentials quicker. States with a system where people can communicate the skills and the competencies they have gained to ensure employers recognize those skills is beneficial to both the State, their workforce, and employers.

Another innovative idea for states is to consider digital credentials or employment passports. These learning employment records list individual skills and credentials and ensure the records are recognized across educational institutions, workforce systems, and employers. This offers a seamless transition between learning and employment opportunities. This system can provide support to credential earning pathways such as competency-based education, mentioned previously. The Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) uses a technology firm called Merit, a digital platform that tracks nearly 850,000 professional hours across more than 100 state-run COVID-19 vaccinations sites. By accelerating training credentials, it has helped expedite vaccine distribution to the public. FDEM predicted that this digital credential system roughly tracked and verified nearly 1 million professional hours ([Businesswire, 2021](#)).

In July 2018, President Trump signed [Executive Order 13845](#), establishing the National Council for the American Worker. The council drafted a national workforce strategy to support the American worker. The council developed a forward-looking white paper on the use of Learning Employment Records (LER) and even piloted their use ([Department of Commerce, 2020](#)). An LER is a system that contains verifiable information about a person's achievements spanning an inclusive range of contexts in education, training, both formal or

informal, and in the classroom or workplace. LERs can record, verify, and transmit learning achievements between learning institutions, businesses, and individuals. The report states that in 2018 there were 3.8 million nurses in the United States, and approximately 2.2 million of them work in hospitals. Unfortunately, the healthcare hiring process has proven time-consuming and expensive – from both the employer and employee perspective. LERs can streamline the job searching and hiring process, which could positively affect healthcare professionals seeking employment and reduce hiring costs for employers. Nurses, for example, would be able to preserve records of their credentials, showcase relevant skills, and keep all certifications up to date. The council’s white paper and pilot studies concluded a critical need for continued support from the federal government for LERs to be used across the Nation. This system can decrease inequities by reducing the focus on degrees and credentials that people have earned and increase focusing on what skills job seekers have. Using LERs to align education and the workforce can improve efficiencies to connect more people to family-sustaining careers.

Keeping parents informed about education and workforce system alignment is important to the success of these efforts. Under the Trump Administration, ED implemented a revised [College Scorecard](#), which reports college student graduation rates and first-year median incomes for graduates ([Department of Education, n.d.](#)). The scorecard breaks down income, student loan debt statistics, and transfers of full and part-time students. One critical element of the scorecard is the link to the DOL information on apprenticeships. This national-level tool helps provide information students need to make informed decisions about their education and workforce plans. Therefore, state leaders should promote transparency and accountability by ensuring students and their families are provided information about the value of the potential career path or college consideration. Families and students should know what to expect for their investment regarding degree completion, graduation rates, salary projections, existing job opportunities, and the credentials required to pursue desired careers. It is important for states to share this information with families and students considering various college or career pathways. States should continue to seek to increase graduation rates, especially at 2-year colleges. For example, re-enrollment campaigns in Florida have shown some evidence of success ([Ortagus, Tanner & McFarlin, Jr., 2020](#)). Community colleges have the potential to help students gain access to viable pathways to family-sustaining careers, given the type of credentials, certificates, and/or degrees they offer beyond the traditional pathway. However, according to the most recent data available, in 2016, only 33 percent of community college students earned a certificate or degree within 6 years of enrollment. In comparison, 63 percent of students attending a 4-year public university completed their degree within 6 years of enrollment ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2021](#)). Providing this information provides transparency to parents and maintains institutional accountability. Streamlining this information sharing is critical to both parents, students, and institutions. The state can create and implement an online portal introduced by high schools and utilized by faculty, parents, and students. Like digitalized credentials employment passports, the portal would be a way for workforce industries and educational institutions to align their scorecards, education requirements, and pathways to obtain the necessary skills or education to pursue the career desired by the student.

States can also utilize youth apprenticeships. Youth apprenticeship programs can bring together learning and work by providing real-world opportunities for students to earn money while they acquire on-the-job skills and get a head start on their careers. Youth apprenticeship programs are an example of how states can expand high-quality, work-based learning. For example, Colorado recently passed legislation to support a statewide intermediary called CareerWise Colorado. This innovative model enables students to

participate in an apprenticeship program to split their time between the high school classroom and the workplace. The youth apprentices can enter the program their junior year of high school and complete it within 1 year of graduating high school. The benefits of this program include earning money, receiving on-the-job experience, and obtaining a nationally recognized certificate and college credit. It also benefits employers, as they can hire a diverse workforce with the skills and talents necessary to fill their available jobs ([EdNote, 2021](#)).

CONCLUSIONS

While we work to boost the economy and get Americans back to work, policymakers need to create better policies that holistically benefit the American worker. In the decades leading up to COVID-19, the labor force has seen dramatic changes in employer skill demands and job requirements. It is time to fix systems and policies that have perpetuated disparities in education and skills, career opportunities, and economic well-being. Aligning workforce development with education and employment has the potential to transform lives. The first step for states is to systematically assemble all the information available and evaluate the quality of the workforce development programs and reform them to increase their efficacy. The What Works Clearinghouse, funded by ED, has provided evidence to early childhood and K-12 education policy and practice for diverse stakeholders for nearly 2 decades ([Department of Education, n.d.](#)). Likewise, the [DOL's Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation Research](#) provides a repository of research on formative and summative studies of labor market programs and policies ([Department of Labor, n.d.](#)). Extending these resources to the broader workforce development and employment system would be a valuable source of information.

The most critical asset to rebuilding the economy and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic is the American worker. State leaders, by driving reforms and focusing on in-demand skills, can help make the education and workforce systems responsive to the needs of workers, learners, and employers. Responsive systems provide clear opportunities for people and eliminate barriers that prohibit access to educational pathways. By understanding the workforce system and the needs of business and industry, it is possible to identify areas of improvement within existing state systems. The case for aligning the education and workforce systems is clear. As the research shows, the American worker will significantly benefit from and ultimately sustain the economy through better coordination of education and workforce systems.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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