

Executive Summary

COVID-19 caused students across the country to postpone or change [their plans for college](#) while simultaneously [dampening job prospects](#). Hardest hit have been [families in poverty and students of color](#), both educationally and economically.

The pandemic is also hastening a steady march toward a [fluid gig economy](#) that displaces blue-collar workers with robots, contractors, and lower-wage service industry workers. During this transition, a college education will likely be more important than ever; during our last recession, more than [95 percent of newly emerging careers](#) required a postsecondary degree or credential.

Over the past 10 years, states across the country have invested in career and technical education (CTE) to boost student access to a living-wage career. Most recently, this effort has focused on “[new](#)” CTE, which prepares students for living-wage technical careers such as nursing and engineering. High-quality CTE programs [can improve](#) outcomes in high school, lead to higher wages, and even result in higher [postsecondary enrollment](#) rates, especially for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Career pathways that include college and career preparation can benefit students during a COVID recovery, but for that to happen states must do more. In many states, the [quality of career education is uneven](#) and [not aligned](#) with economic realities.

We find that states share three common weaknesses that impede quality, access, and alignment:

Little support for districts that lack capacity: Developing career education programs requires analytical capacity to identify appropriate careers and certifications. Developing productive industry partners that can inform programs and offer real-world learning is time consuming and requires knowledge and connections many schools don’t have. However, all too often states do not support districts to bridge these gaps.

Misaligned credit award and funding policies that prevent real-world learning: Real-world learning through job shadowing or internships can offer valuable exposure to students as they reinforce skills and knowledge from the classroom and explore post-high school options. But credit award and funding policies in many states create barriers to schools that want to make these learning experiences part of a student’s high school education.

Weak career accountability and information systems: No state has a comprehensive accountability system that provides consistent, transparent information about student enrollment, graduation rates, and academic and career attainment for all career education providers. Without it, state education agencies and schools cannot compare performance, identify schools that need support, or flag models as exemplars. And without data about career prospects and program performance, families do not have the information they need to make informed choices about high school.

To solve these problems and create a more coherent education system that prepares students for life after graduation, states should take these four steps:

1. Support districts to conduct analysis, form industry partnerships, and scale innovation.

Too many states leave schools and districts on their own to identify the right programs, credentials, and industry partners. States can play a valuable role in helping schools develop quality career education programs by:

- Centralizing job market and employment data, similar to Texas’s [dashboard](#) of employment data and [list of approved](#) pathways and course sequences. [Indiana](#) identifies high-wage, high-demand careers and disperses tiered funds to aligned courses.
- Working with industry partners to [continually update](#) lists of industry-approved and in-demand certificates and assessments, and phasing out those that are no longer relevant, like [Kentucky](#) and [Florida](#).
- Creating intermediaries like the Delaware [Office of Work-Based Learning](#), [Career Wise CO](#) or [Career Connect WA](#) in order to [help districts engage with industry](#) for work-based learning. But districts also need close relationships with industry for ongoing program input—something that intermediaries [could do more to support](#).
- Supporting district [experimentation](#) during the pandemic by identifying and incentivizing innovations. The Colorado Community College System (CCCS) hosts bimonthly calls with secondary and postsecondary program directors, which helps them identify innovators like [Westminster High School](#). To scale implementation, CCCS showcases examples, coordinates mentoring, and offers competitive grants.

2. Revise state policies that pose barriers to real-world and postsecondary learning.

Credit award, seat-time funding, teacher certification, and articulation policies can all pose barriers to program implementation. States can address some of these by:

- Allowing districts to award credit for out-of-school learning, like [New Hampshire](#), or using a competency-based model to award course credit, like [Virginia](#). States can consider [prior learning assessments](#) at the high school level to award credit for learning that occurs outside the classroom. Students can be credited for hands-on-learning and schools can tap local expertise without having to hire or train new teachers.
- Adopting new funding models, like [South Carolina](#) or [Florida](#), that create alternatives to funding based on seat time so students have more flexibility in when, where, and at what pace they finish courses without penalizing schools or districts financially. The pandemic has created [more incentive](#) to explore alternatives to seat-time funding.
- Encouraging [technical dual-enrollment programs](#) that allow high schools to coordinate with local colleges and experts, like [Georgia](#) and [Arizona](#).
- Breaking postsecondary and career credentials into stackable chunks, allowing students to work toward an ultimate degree while [still carrying interim credentials](#) that are recognized across institutions and by industry, as [Ohio has done](#).
- Working with districts to identify local or state policy workarounds; [sometimes the barriers schools face](#) are the result of local policy, or a misunderstanding of what is allowable by the state.

3. Deliver consistent information about available programs and careers.

State agencies, providers, and families need information about available programs to assess the landscape:

- States should set [clear definitions and standards](#) for career and technical education, and then identify program providers using these terms.
- Public-facing, statewide information systems, like [My Colorado Journey](#) and Indiana's [NextLevel Jobs](#) provide youth and families with valuable information about regional careers, wages, demand projections, and available programs. States can also consider investing in or creating one-on-one career navigation services, like [MyBestBets](#).

4. Hold all providers accountable to academic, professional, and postsecondary outcomes.

States can leverage existing K–12 accountability systems to ensure all students have equitable access to programs, and that programs deliver strong academic and employment outcomes. The pandemic caused disruptions to state testing, giving states an opportunity to reassess and improve their accountability systems by:

- Encouraging schools to offer effective career preparation programming by using measures for work-based learning like [West Virginia and Georgia](#), or measures for dual credit like [Illinois and North Dakota](#). States can incentivize college *and* career preparation by offering bonus points when students achieve both, like in [Delaware](#).
- Conducting an audit of the [full range of career program providers](#) and including them in public-facing school reporting systems so they all are held accountable to the same standards, and families and the public can compare their effectiveness using common academic and work readiness measures. This would include technical high schools, shared-time centers, and career academies within comprehensive high schools. To date, no state does this.

Disruptions from the pandemic will likely force states to reimagine their systems for supporting postsecondary transitions, informing the public about what's working, and measuring schools' effectiveness. Before the pandemic, too many states left schools and districts on their own to determine goals and assess the effectiveness of their career-based learning programs, which resulted in incoherent and inequitable learning experiences for students. The systems they rebuild after the pandemic should be designed to set every student up for success in a complex and uncertain future.