

Policy Design Principles for Connecting Education to Work

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State policymakers recognize the economic imperative to ensure that education and training are connected to good jobs. Employers are seeking — and are often [struggling](#) — to hire appropriately skilled workers. For job seekers, the [path](#) to a good job with education beyond a high school diploma is certainly clearer than one without postsecondary education or training; however, with continually advancing technologies and employer expectations, individuals also need periodic access to additional training to [upskill and reskill](#) throughout their careers. As a result, there is both need and demand for on- and off-ramps to postsecondary education and training. This more fluid interplay requires a cultural shift so that leaders think differently about the design of education and training programs and craft policies that support more seamless transitions for individuals moving through and between education and work.

In response to these conditions, policymakers are [forging](#) stronger connections between training and employer needs at state, regional and local levels. Policymakers are also acting to expand [secondary](#) and postsecondary career and technical education, to promote access to workforce-aligned postsecondary programs, and to engage employers through [work-based learning](#) and [apprenticeships](#). There are multiple entities across the workforce development system engaged in workforce training, and these entities are not always intentionally connected or coordinated in their efforts. This can result in gaps or repetitive efforts that ultimately will not serve the people moving through them and may not meet the needs of employers.



For More On This Issue

Consult these resources for more information on using or implementing the principles.

- [Connecting Education and Work](#)
- [Approaches to State Workforce Development Systems](#)
- [Supporting Successful Student Transitions Through State Financial Aid Reform](#)
- [Workforce Development Systems](#)
- [Data You Can Use: Keeping Pace With Labor Market Change](#)
- [Free Community College: An Approach to Increase Adult Student Success in Postsecondary Education](#)

To support state policymakers on this issue, Education Commission of the States, with the support of Strada Education Network, engaged education and workforce leaders in 2019 and again in 2021 to develop and refine the following principles of policy design for connecting education to work:

- Principle 1: Design policy to support the diverse needs of **people** engaging or reengaging with work-relevant education.
- Principle 2: Formalize **collaboration** at the state, local and regional levels to align postsecondary credential outcomes with labor market needs.
- Principle 3: Develop **data** infrastructure and capacity to produce timely, transparent and actionable data analysis for education and workforce stakeholders.
- Principle 4: Leverage existing **funding** streams to support shared policy goals.



These four principles are intended to be a set of guideposts to help policymakers identify the challenge they are trying to address; they can also serve as a mechanism for policymakers to evaluate policy and programs. The principles are interconnected

and rely on the first principle — centering people and their needs when designing policy — as the foundation. Formalized stakeholder collaboration — the second principle — begins with a common understanding of the individuals each program or system is trying to serve to set common goals. The data collected and analyzed — the third principle — should be reflective of progress on the common priorities set to support those individuals. And funding streams — the fourth principle — should be aligned based on the common goals and needs stakeholders identify by examining the available data to support a diverse group of people.

While these principles were originally developed to support adult learners that engage or reengage with postsecondary and workforce training systems, using these principles to guide workforce education policy development generally can benefit all learners.

PRINCIPLE 1

Design policy to support the diverse needs of individuals engaging or reengaging with work-relevant education.

Adults engaging or reengaging with education and training are a [diverse](#) group and may face any number of [barriers](#) as they look to advance their skills and credentials. For example, 64% of today's postsecondary students are working while in college. Around 40% are going to school part time. In addition, one-quarter of postsecondary students are parents, and about one-third live at or below the federal poverty line. This diverse student body requires a range of policy supports to connect their education to work.

According to [data](#) gathered in 2020 by the Strada-Gallup Education Survey, American adults identified three primary barriers to enrolling in additional education and training. Of those surveyed:

- 55% identified competing obligations and logistics (including work or family commitments, course schedules and transportation) as a major barrier.
- 49% identified self-doubt as a major barrier.
- 48% identified cost as a major barrier.

Additional barriers include physical [distance](#) from education opportunities, uneven [access](#) to broadband and devices, health and mental health challenges, misalignment between education opportunities and workforce needs, and a lack of clear information about education and career pathways that is accessible to workers. Policymakers can help students be successful by designing policy to be flexible in supporting these differentiated needs.

To ensure that individuals, regardless of their previous educational experiences or current employment, can access the education and training they need, policies should specifically aim to remove barriers for those who [may not have engaged](#) in formal education or work in some time. This may include consideration of policies that award credit for [prior learning](#) or for [competency-based education](#), which can help individuals move more efficiently through education and training programs with formal acknowledgement of their work experience. Timely and flexible [financial aid policies](#) can provide necessary support to individuals when it can have the greatest impact on enrollment and persistence. Supporting access to shorter term, [stackable credentials](#) can also help meet individuals where they are.

In 2021, **Florida** enacted [H.B. 1507](#) to create the Office of Reimagining Education and Career Help within the governor's office. The office is charged with increasing collaboration, leveraging workforce and economic data, and directing funding to support improved quality, equity and access "to a more integrated workforce and education system for all Floridians." Specifically, the office is charged with creating a "no-wrong-door-entry" strategy to ensure that individuals seeking education and training are not required to visit multiple locations when seeking access to education and training. This streamlining of services is intended to support individuals as they work to overcome barriers to success, like child care assistance or food insecurity.

PRINCIPLE 2

Formalize collaboration at the state, local and regional levels to align postsecondary credential outcomes with labor market needs.

Workforce-connected education and training impacts multiple systems, each with their own leadership and governance structures, making collaboration across these systems and with stakeholder groups essential. Key collaborators go beyond workforce agencies, education agencies and institutions. For instance, it is important to include employers or industry groups that can ensure education and training programs align to workforce needs. Health and human services agencies that administer programs and funding streams can be leveraged to help individuals address barriers to success too.

Formalizing collaboration via the state's workforce [board](#), a separate legislative or executive council or committee can [support](#) engagement of a broad range of state-level stakeholder groups in setting common state workforce development

goals. Once goals are identified, these formalized structures allow stakeholders to bring their unique perspectives, assets, data and funding together in a coordinated way to achieve those goals. Key leaders, particularly governors, can set these collaborative structures up for success by prioritizing the efforts and affirming and supporting a common agenda.

Further, employment and labor market needs are often specific to local communities or regions. To meet localized economic needs, local entities must also be aligned and coordinated in their approach to education and training. Therefore, in addition to statewide workforce boards, state policymakers may also consider enabling or incentivizing local or regional collaborative efforts such as [sector partnerships](#). [Intermediary groups](#), like a [chamber of commerce](#), as in **Hawaii**, or a standalone nonprofit, like CareerWise **Colorado**, can serve as conveners and leaders of sector partnerships both at the state and regional level.

Adults seeking additional education and training, particularly those who are unemployed or underemployed, benefit from the supports offered through such coordinated systems, including financial assistance to address food insecurity, housing needs or child care. For example, [two-generation](#) strategies, requiring coordination across human services agencies, workforce agencies and education providers at the state and local levels, have [led](#) to better outcomes both for parents seeking education and training and their children.

In 2018, **Indiana** enacted [S.B. 50](#), which created the Governor's Workforce Cabinet to address Indiana's current and future workforce needs and align state and federal resources in support of a talent-driven education and workforce system. The [cabinet](#) brings together agency leaders from K-12, postsecondary, workforce social services, corrections and economic development agencies, as well as legislators and business leaders.

By bringing these key stakeholders together, and through the leadership of Gov. Eric Holcomb, the cabinet developed a unified strategic plan, [A Better Future for Every Hoosier](#), with goals that are learner-centered, employer-driven and results-focused. The plan, which also serves as the state's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act plan, outlines coordination and collaboration across multiple programs and funding streams that will better serve Indiana's target population and provide individuals with the resources they need to upskill or reskill for the job. The strategies include co-locating and cross-training front-line program staff for smooth customer service and to reduce barriers for individuals accessing state services.

This allows, for example, individuals filing for unemployment insurance to access information about funding for education and training opportunities that they may be able to take advantage of.

PRINCIPLE 3

Develop data infrastructure and capacity to produce timely, transparent and actionable data analysis for education and workforce stakeholders.

An interconnected statewide longitudinal data [system](#) is critical to the development of responsive education systems that meet workforce needs and that support successful student outcomes. Key components of a state longitudinal data system that can identify workforce needs and advance common education and training goals include participation and outcomes data for education (both P-12 and postsecondary) as well as workforce program data and labor market data, including [unemployment and wage information](#).

To effectively support attainment, linked state education and workforce data must be paired with the capacity to analyze and share that data in a way that is accessible, timely and actionable for education and workforce leaders. This may include reports that disaggregate data to help policymakers and program administrators better understand and identify areas of need and make policy or practice adjustments to improve outcomes. Many states have created public-facing [dashboards](#) to share information about high demand occupations. Similarly, data sources like Emsi, LinkedIn or Burning Glass that offer real-time information on job openings and in-demand skills can also be part of a state's data analysis.

Those [engaging](#) or looking to reengage with education and training also need access to data and information to understand their options, the labor market outcomes of those options, how well those options connect to in-demand jobs and what they can expect from participation in a program. Entities such as Credential Engine have launched significant efforts to provide transparent information about the [nearly 1 million](#) unique credentials available to individuals, and provide a mechanism for states to tailor their own statewide credential registries to ensure transparent and accurate information is available to learners.

Virginia lawmakers enacted [H. 1876](#) in 2021. It expands the type of data that state agencies may share with the Virginia Workforce System to support workforce program evaluation and policy analysis. The legislation requires 11 agencies — including the Virginia Employment Commission, department of social services, department of juvenile justice, department of education and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia — to enter into a memorandum of understanding to share data as part of the Virginia Workforce Data Trust database. While the sharing of this data is intended to support workforce program evaluation and policy, other goals in the legislation include improving coordination, outcomes and efficiency of public workforce programs, and enabling the development of an application for consumer-facing information.

PRINCIPLE 4

Leverage existing funding streams to support shared policy goals.

Policymakers can support the achievement of state workforce goals by aligning and leveraging existing and new funding streams to support individuals engaging in education and training. While Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act is the primary federal workforce funding stream, states working in a collaborative manner across systems can bring together multiple federal funding streams, state funding and private investments to support desired outcomes for workforce training. For example, states can leverage the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition [SNAP Employment and Training](#) program to pay for transportation and child care for SNAP participants engaging in workforce training to help them overcome participation and success barriers.

Policymakers may consider the funding needed to support systems as well as individuals. Funding support for systems allows for building the infrastructure needed to establish and run education and training programs, while funding support for individuals can [help](#) learners overcome barriers and ensure more equitable access and use of that infrastructure.

System investments include:

- Data infrastructure.
- Collaborative partnerships.
- Higher education infrastructure and workforce training provider infrastructure (including staff, facilities and equipment).
- Credential recognition and capture.

Learner investments include:

- Direct financial support to learners to access courses.
- Direct financial support to learners to meet other financial obligations, such as food, housing and child care.
- Outreach to populations not currently engaged.
- Access to pathways for those not currently engaged.

When leveraging federal funding or making state investments in both systems and individuals, policymakers might consider ways to offer flexibility. Flexibility allows a workforce system to be responsive to changing labor demands and the unique barriers that individuals may face while moving into and through education and training programs.

[H.B. 5576](#) was enacted in 2020 to support **Michigan's Sixty by 30** state attainment goal. Michigan Reconnect provides grants for residents to pursue an associate degree or postsecondary certificate at one of Michigan's 28 community colleges or three tribal colleges. Recipients must be Michigan residents, age 25 or older, have graduated high school or have obtained a GED, and must not currently hold an associate or bachelor's degree.

While the legislation was designed and supported by a broad coalition, including Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, Republican and Democratic legislators, business groups, higher education institutions and advocacy groups, the timing of the bill's passage coincided with budget uncertainty because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that it was not possible to fund the program as originally conceived. In response, Whitmer announced a new program to fund scholarship assistance for essential workers who worked outside their home during the first wave of the pandemic. The state used federal CARES Act funding, specifically the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund, to pay for the program. The Futures for Frontliners scholarship [attracted](#) over 120,000 applicants in the first three months, providing an [opportunity](#) for learners to gain new skills and earn credentials, as well as [an increase](#) in community college enrollment across the state.

With a clearer and more positive budget picture in September 2020, Whitmer and the Legislature were able to include funding for Michigan Reconnect scholarships in the 2021 budget, and that program has already [attracted](#) over 82,000 applicants. In addition to scholarship assistance, the program supports 10 regional navigators tasked with helping students who apply complete other requirements, such as their college applications and FAFSA, and navigate the financial aid and enrollment processes. Navigators also work with the local workforce centers to identify any other resources learners may need to be successful.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Education and the Workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the economy, education systems, work and life for America and the world in many ways. However, the negative impacts of these disruptions have been [disproportionately](#) felt by people of color, individuals with low incomes, individuals with disabilities and other historically marginalized communities. As states look to rebuild and recover, it will be important to create more equitable opportunities to ensure that all individuals can participate in the recovery and advance their economic status. Many states are advancing legislation and using federal funding for [upskilling and reskilling](#) efforts that target individuals who are unemployed, underemployed or need updated skills to advance in their career. These responsive actions may act as pilots and provide insights for how the principles presented here can be applied to workforce-connected education policy design.

For instance, to be able to identify policies and strategies that support engagement and reengagement in education and training, state policymakers can first look to understand the unique needs and barriers these individuals face. Through [Public Viewpoint](#), Strada Education Network has gathered insights into the experiences of adults whose education and/or work were disrupted by the pandemic and what they might need to reengage with education. Some [key findings](#) indicate that many adults who changed education plans cited financial costs or competing work demands as major barriers. They also learned that these disrupted learners are interested in nontraditional learning options, such as employer-based training or online noncollege learning, rather than enrolling at a two- or four-year college.

In addition to highlighting the need to tailor policy to support people, the pandemic demonstrated the importance of collaboration and data. The economic realities of the pandemic [forced](#) states and regions to be able to identify fast-growing in-demand jobs, the skills needed for those jobs and the education providers who could teach those skills. With strong data infrastructure and good partnerships and collaboration in place, education and workforce systems can shift and be responsive to rapidly changing conditions.

In terms of funding, states can leverage federal relief dollars to support the state's collective workforce development goals, at least in the short term. The adjustments made to Michigan Reconnect are a good example of dedicating federal relief dollars to support front-line workers — one of the most-impacted groups of workers during the pandemic — as they look to upskill or reskill and participate in economic recovery. It is important to note that the relief dollars will not be a [sustainable](#) funding solution in the long term. As these investments are made in education and workforce systems, policymakers may consider closely tracking outcomes of these programs to understand which investments may be worth prioritizing to continue in the future.

Final Thoughts

By designing policy to support the diverse needs of individuals, formalizing collaboration, developing data infrastructure and leveraging federal, state and private funding streams, states have the potential to unlock greater degrees of collaboration and cooperation between the education and work sectors. While these principles do not represent all the policy measures that states can take in the course of this work, they serve as guideposts for state leaders as they take their next steps to improve the connection of education to work.

About the Author

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As director of policy, Siri supports Education Commission of the States' policy research and analysis work by providing strategic leadership and engaging with partners and stakeholders. Siri has more than 10 years of experience in state policy, including serving as the governor's education policy advisor in Montana.

Siri is dedicated to providing actionable resources and information to state leaders because she believes that equitable access to educational opportunities is fundamental for individuals and communities to thrive. Contact Siri at ssmillie@ecs.org.

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