

# Strengthening Career Pathways Through the Power of State and Local Partnerships



Intentional and early collaboration between state and local leaders is vital to ensuring success in high-quality career pathways for all learners. Strengthening partnerships between local entities and state agencies helps each partner achieve its mission and amplify its reach.

State and local leaders can cooperate to advance mutual interests by leveraging their strengths and levers for change. Local leaders have an ear closer to the ground; work directly with learners, families and other key partners; and can represent the needs of their stakeholders. States can add capacity where it is needed and create the enabling conditions for local programs to be successful. Strong state and local partnerships ensure that local leaders can secure the flexibility, funding and resources that establish long-term sustainability for local programs and initiatives. All this work cannot be completed without overcoming the significant barriers of building trust among local partners, breaking down silos within state agencies, and creating a shared mindset across state and local agencies to see the benefits and opportunities of engaging in shared collaborative work.

This brief elevates five key components of strong state and local partnerships:

- 1 Building partnership by deepening trusted relationships;
- 2 Funding innovation through strategic local pilots;
- 3 Providing meaningful technical assistance;
- 4 Equipping locals with supports and space for cross-sector partnerships; and
- 5 Aligning visions and definitions.

The brief explores how **Colorado, Hawaii, Nebraska** and **Tennessee** each launched initiatives to catalyze local strategic planning efforts and strengthen career pathway quality in all communities. These states took a bottom-up approach to improving Career Technical Education (CTE) quality, equipping local leaders with tools to make strategic decisions and building the trust between state and local leaders.

## Perkins V Connection

The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) reinforces opportunities for state leaders to collaborate with local leaders and support local innovation. A new addition in Perkins V, the Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA), is one opportunity to strengthen partnerships between local and state agencies to promote transparency and data-driven decisionmaking. CLNAs require local eligible recipients to assess and audit their programs at least once every two years, with input from a broad group of stakeholders and partners.<sup>1</sup>

Given the lift of leading a CLNA — in particular a truly impactful, data-driven and inclusive CLNA — states have a clear role to play in supporting local recipients. States can support locals by bringing clarity to the overall process;

providing relevant, disaggregated data; and building capacity to design, execute and implement findings from the Perkins V CLNA.

The CLNA is just one example, but states have plenty of other ways to support local leaders in their Perkins V implementation, including:

- Using reserve funding to incubate local innovation;
- Using state leadership funds to support activities such as developing statewide programs of study, establishing statewide articulation agreements, providing professional development, building capacity to identify and close equity gaps, etc.; and
- Providing tools and resources to support local reporting of performance indicators.

## Building Partnership by Deepening Trusted Relationships

Many states have made deep-rooted efforts to strengthen relationships with local partners. One approach is simply to meet local partners where they are by traveling to different regions of the state to understand their challenges and successes and provide targeted technical assistance and support. States should focus on developing trusting relationships with a broad group of stakeholders in the larger educational community to build buy-in for CTE from outside stakeholders. Developing and/or building on existing relationships should be a shared responsibility for all state staff to create trusted partnerships with local leaders.

In **Colorado**, for example, state leaders in the Colorado Community College System Office recognized the importance of flexibility and collaboration when working on the strategic planning process for Perkins V. To develop its state plan<sup>2</sup> Colorado conducted numerous stakeholder engagement meetings to ensure that the plan would serve the local partners and would not reflect a top-down, state-determined approach.<sup>3</sup> Six regional meetings were held throughout Colorado in February 2019. Two hundred and

eighty stakeholders, including parents and representatives from business and industry, community organizations, workforce and economic development agencies and education (secondary and postsecondary), attended. The regional stakeholder meeting objectives included sharing information on the CTE visioning and strategic planning process, collecting feedback on how to improve the state CTE system as a component of Colorado's talent strategy, and establishing mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders for feedback on Colorado's strategic plan for CTE.<sup>4</sup> The state also used its convening power during the planning process to involve local Colorado Association of Career and Technical Education and workforce partners, as well as labor organizations, to work alongside local CTE leaders in the development of the plan. From the strategic planning process Colorado gained significant feedback about the concurrent enrollment process and the creation of new partnerships for work-based learning. As state leaders convened the regions for the CLNA process, work-based learning and concurrent enrollment were elevated to support partnership development.

Similarly, between 2016 and 2018, the **Nebraska** Department of Education (NDE) deepened relationships with local leaders through a privately funded listening tour. State leaders traveled to each region for open and honest conversations with business and

### Benefits of Partnership

**Building trust:** Building positive relationships is a critical component of partnership because it provides the foundation for trust. A partnership founded on a strong, trusting relationship also allows for stability and longer-term impact.<sup>5</sup>

**Sharing resources and building capacity:** Partnerships can pool resources such as knowledge, people and tools. Partnering between state and local agencies can provide entities with access to a wider range of expertise including a wider

pool of technical assistance, experience, skills and networks. Leveraging the unique skills, knowledge and perspectives of different partners can increase efficiency and multiply impact.<sup>6</sup>

**More opportunities:** Partnerships create shared understanding and collaboration in the work, allowing local and/or state agencies to have more free time and flexibility to explore new opportunities to advance their goals.

education leaders. These conversations started with fellowship through food and moved to open dialogue about what was and was not working in CTE at a local and statewide level. The candid conversations allowed local education leaders to create stronger partnerships with industry. One

result of the meetings was many new work-based learning opportunities. Additionally, NDE's support and openness during the conversations helped build trust between the state and its regional partners. As a follow-up with the local stakeholders the state reached out to participants to encourage continued conversations locally. Nebraska also kept a database of participants for future partnerships, assisting the state agency in strengthening the NDE CTE staff's relationship with school districts, community colleges and business partners.

This approach to establishing relationships demonstrates how states are building trust with local partners. Providing opportunities for voice and autonomy offers local leaders the ability to support the state goals for education and economic development while also responding to the needs of learners and employers in their own community.

### Key Components of Strong Partnerships

To build momentum and increase impact, state and local partnerships must have:

- ✓ Trust among all parties;
- ✓ Ongoing communication;
- ✓ Shared commitment to continuous improvement;
- ✓ Shared commitments established prior to the start of the work;<sup>7</sup>
- ✓ Common understanding of findings;
- ✓ Connection of mission to shared goals;<sup>8</sup>
- ✓ Shared focus, common language and coherence;<sup>9</sup>
- ✓ Commitment of time and staff to the partnership; and
- ✓ Shared commitment of resources (funding, materials, knowledge).<sup>10</sup>

### Funding Innovation Through Strategic Local Pilots

With high-quality, trusted relationships as a foundation, states can leverage resources and knowledge to accelerate local innovation around career pathways. One approach that states use is issuing competitive planning and implementation grants to help start up new career pathways. In 2018, the Hawaii Department of Education (HDOE) partnered with the Castle Foundation to help transform Castle High School in **Kaneohe, Hawaii**, into a wall-to-wall academy. The state leveraged Perkins V reserve funds along with private funding from the Castle Foundation to provide resources and technical support to local leaders at Castle High School. This work included not just updating curriculum but also building the career pathways into facility design through the designation of specific areas of the school for particular career pathways. Castle High School teachers also connected with the neighboring middle school to establish career pathways across the continuum of education. The

school was not alone in this work, as many schools in Hawaii were integrating academy models into their local high schools. While the work was driven by local leaders, the state worked alongside the schools to provide technical assistance. Both the state and local high schools benefited from learning alongside one another and building on the expertise of the cohort.


A bit farther away in **Wilson County, Tennessee**, local employers identified a need for more high-skilled learners to enter the biotechnology workforce pipeline. However, the labor market need was not yet significant enough across the state to warrant a new CTE program of study at a statewide level. In Tennessee, schools that wish to implement CTE programs of study that are not on the state-approved list must provide justification using local labor market data and employer recommendations.<sup>11</sup> Wilson County, with assistance from the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), applied for Perkins funding for a local CTE program of study in biotechnology. To support the partnerships, TDOE leveraged Perkins reserve funds and provided technical assistance to help Wilson County build and scale a special program for biotechnology that would meet the state's criteria for approval. The state also provided feedback on the application, shared resources for stronger labor market datasets, gave guidance on writing more substantial standards for the proposed courses and convened labor organizations to help the program grow into what it is today. After initially approving the program in 2018 as a "special program of study," TDOE worked with Wilson County and others to scale the biotechnology program into the statewide BioSTEM program of study<sup>12</sup> in the 2019–20 school year.<sup>13</sup>

## Providing Meaningful Technical Assistance

Another critical role state leaders play in supporting strong state and local partnerships is engaging with local leaders through technical assistance. Often, the challenge for states in ensuring quality and equity in local career pathways and CTE programs is balancing compliance monitoring with technical assistance and support. Rather than penalizing local leaders when they fail to meet standards for quality and equity, the state can build capacity to implement programs with fidelity through thoughtful, customized assistance and supports. States can develop a supportive approach to technical assistance with local leaders to ensure that their collaborative work is meaningful and provides local leaders the capacity to ensure access and develop best practices within their institutions.

*Launched in 2012, reVISION is a data-driven approach to CTE program improvement that builds local capacity to analyze and transform CTE programs.*

For example, **Nebraska's** CTE reVISION process lays the foundation for strong state and local partnerships through direct technical assistance and support for local education agencies.<sup>14</sup> Launched in 2012, reVISION is a data-driven approach to CTE program improvement that builds local capacity to analyze and transform CTE programs. Through the reVISION process, all recipients (secondary and postsecondary) are required to analyze student enrollment and performance data disaggregated by program and subpopulation. Portions of both the reVISION process and local application require recipients to identify any disparities in participation and performance, develop strategies to address them, and direct



Perkins funds toward alleviating and eliminating any barriers. Through grant and program monitoring at the state level, Nebraska CTE staff provides ongoing assistance when needed. Statewide leadership funds as well as the required set-asides for special populations are leveraged to develop and implement supports in this area.

In the transition to Perkins V, the Nebraska Department of Education leveraged the new requirement for local recipients to complete a CLNA in order to scale the reVISION model statewide. Today, reVISION is the foundation for improving and implementing CTE across the state and is used to drive funding, policy and programmatic decisions for school districts, Perkins consortia and community colleges. NDE's goal is to use the reVISION implementation process to drive program improvement and better support historically marginalized learners and learners with special population status across the state.

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At the postsecondary level in **Tennessee**, the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), which supervises all public community colleges and technical colleges in the state, supports and encourages TBR institutions to work with their local economic development and workforce development boards, including the local Chamber of Commerce, to support economic growth within each college's service area. To support these efforts, TDOE and TBR partnered together to create an inter-agency agreement that supports the work of Tennessee Pathways.<sup>15</sup> This contract funds a statewide team of regional coordinators who support K-12 alignment with postsecondary and industry in each of the state's nine economic regions through extensive technical assistance including sharing data, sharing best practices and bringing together stakeholders.<sup>16</sup> Stakeholder meetings connect area education and workforce professionals to align high school and postsecondary coursework with local labor market needs and foster partnerships between schools and districts and local colleges and employers that help students get a head start on completing their degrees or industry credentials. The regional coordinators are essentially the "glue" that holds together cross-sector partnerships that support education and workforce alignment at the regional level.



## Equipping Locals With Supports and Space for Cross-Sector Partnerships

To prepare all learners for college and careers effectively, state agencies must break down silos and work collaboratively across agencies and sectors at both a state and local level. Developing strong partnerships can strengthen work by identifying opportunities to braid funding, leverage data to support continuous improvement and measurable outcomes, and build shared commitment for the work. Further, partnering with local private-sector leaders can bring new insights to the table and ensure that career pathways are relevant and aligned with the needs of the labor market.

Over the last several years, locals have strengthened existing collaborative relationships and built new partnerships with the support of state-level initiatives. In **Northeast Tennessee** leaders came together using a regional model to address the challenge that learners were graduating from secondary and postsecondary programs unprepared for the workforce. Based on these collaborative discussions, partners agreed to close the skills gap by scaling up the Work Ethic Diploma,<sup>17</sup> which was originally developed as part of a Labor & Education Alignment Program (LEAP) grant awarded to Tennessee College of Applied Technology Morristown in coordination with school systems and industry partners in surrounding counties.<sup>18</sup> LEAP projects are selected based on a competitive process by the Governor's Workforce Subcabinet, a task force consisting of leadership from TDOE, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development and Tennessee Department Human Services as well

as the University of Tennessee, TBR system and Tennessee Higher Education Commission. The LEAP Program was designed to develop training pipelines that provide learners with the specific skills needed to fill in-demand occupations. By establishing these workforce-responsive post-secondary training pipelines, LEAP aligns to both the state's postsecondary attainment goal and the authentic needs of Tennessee's industries.

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Learners that receive the Work Ethic Diploma recognition, which is designated on the high school diploma, are guaranteed job interviews based on the number of points they receive on the endorsement. Learners earn points based on attendance, CTE completion, grade point average, etc. To date, more than 70 employers in the area have signed on in support of the Work Ethic Diploma. While originally implemented in Northeast Tennessee, the program has added partner schools throughout the state and is now available to any school system in Tennessee.<sup>19</sup> The state is currently recruiting new schools and supporting a partnership independently managed by the Niswonger Foundation to help school systems and learners track their progress toward the Work Ethic Diploma through the WE Track database.<sup>20</sup> WE Track allows students to engage with the program throughout their senior year, while also giving school staff the flexibility to effectively track the program.

## IN THE FIRST THREE MONTHS AFTER ITS LAUNCH, CLIMBHI BRIDGE HAD:

**1,387**

EDUCATORS INTEGRATED INTO THE WEBSITE'S PORTAL;

**220**

BUSINESSES REGISTERED;

**226**

ACTIVE WORK-BASED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES;

**231**

REQUESTS FROM EDUCATORS FOR EMPLOYER WORK-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES;

**More than 10k**

STUDENTS ENGAGED IN EXISTING EVENTS; AND

**577**

IN-KIND HOURS FROM BUSINESSES.

Similarly, in December 2020, **Hawaii** launched an initiative to establish and strengthen relationships between local business and education leaders through work-based learning experiences. The initiative, called ClimbHI Bridge, seeks to inspire students to finish high school and proceed to post-secondary education or employment by educating them about future career paths and the process necessary to achieve their goals. ClimbHI Bridge was developed to provide learners education through the exploration of life's opportunities and real-life exposure through work-based learning experiences such as job shadowing and internships. These opportunities are facilitated by the ClimbHI Bridge web-based portal, which stores information for participating educators and business leaders and allows them to connect virtually. Each business receives training and online resources before gaining access to the portal. Prior to the kickoff, ClimbHI Bridge and its partners began a coordinated initiative to pitch and onboard businesses across the state. At the launch, 200 businesses were already registered on ClimbHI Bridge.

Following the kickoff, the state implemented a three-phase onboarding plan starting with high schools then moving to middle schools and finally ending at elementary. For each phase, the school principal first identifies a point of contact or portal resource manager (PRM). ClimbHI Bridge then creates accounts for the PRMs to access the network portal. Then, PRMs are invited to a statewide training and informational session hosted by HDOE's Office of Curriculum and Instructional Design and ClimbHI Bridge. At this event, PRMs receive support and training on recruiting educators to enter and use the platform as well as technical training on backend pieces of the platform. Throughout the phased-in onboarding process, HDOE collects feedback from PRMs to gain insights into how the educators are interfacing with the portal. HDOE plans to make improvements to the system as needed based on the feedback to scale the platform.



In spring and fall 2021, elementary school teachers will be the last educators to be onboarded onto the platform. The state will continue to provide technical assistance with the support of the ClimbHI Bridge platform to integrate career readiness efforts into the continuum of education from prekindergarten to 12th grade.

Hawaii preserves the island by taking care of its people and those who wish to experience the true meaning of aloha. ClimbHI Bridge's effort to promote jobs to local residents and youth shows the support and collaboration the platform continuously provides to the community, making available opportunities for advancement and career pathways known to all learners in Hawaii.

## Aligning Visions and Definitions

Instrumental to the success of strong state and local partnerships to build and scale high-quality and equitable career pathways is the development of a unified mission and vision for the state, informed by local leaders. This unified mission and vision include ensuring that there is shared terminology across all partner organizations. The creation of a unified mission and vision keeps leaders connected to the end goal through targeted objectives. It also helps create a larger pool of people and resources to commit to achieving the vision. In **Colorado**, state and local leaders representing business and industry,<sup>21</sup> community organizations,<sup>22</sup> postsecondary education<sup>23</sup> and secondary education<sup>24</sup> coalesced around a common definition of work-based learning and an understanding of the full continuum of work-based learning activities. The state's work-based learning continuum is designed to illustrate the variety of work-based learning activities that can be pursued, as well as the dynamics of which activities are housed primarily within educational entities and which are located on a job site. This tool provides clarity about the roles of different stakeholders and opportunity for enhanced communication between partners.

The state CTE team is dedicated to working collaboratively with local and state-level partners to support schools, districts and colleges in designing, implementing, measuring and evaluating work-based learning efforts. The state CTE team has also intentionally designed the work-based learning system with a focus on equity, inclusion and access, including in the definition a multitude of work-based learning experiences ranging from school-based enterprises to credit for work experience to industry-sponsored projects. This definition ensures that all learners are integrated into the work-based learning system through a multitude of possible experiences.

*The more opportunities the state has to bring together practitioners across educational institutions to align mission and vision, the more likely goals and objectives will remain a priority.*

In **Nebraska**, teacher education programs at post-secondary institutions come together every year to discuss developing and enhancing CTE teacher pipelines. These institutions work together with the state to gain an understanding of the latest best practices, how to strengthen current programming, and what supports are available to enhance the program opportunities for learners. The state provides funding and helps facilitate the event to ensure that a statewide perspective on alignment, best practices and supports are offered to the faculty.

Without alignment and support around a statewide vision, a lack of coordination between local and state leaders can occur, leading to misaligned information in career pathways. The more opportunities the state has to bring together practitioners across educational institutions to align mission and vision, the more likely goals and objectives will remain a priority.

## Strategies to Strengthen State and Local Partnerships

State leaders are responsible for ensuring that career pathways are high quality and equitable. However, there is often tension between state control and local autonomy, and while state leaders can take a 30,000-foot view of how equitably career pathways are serving learners and direct resources to help scale innovation, local leaders often have a better understanding of the priorities and needs of their communities. The best way to address this tension is by leveraging competitive advantage. States have the resources to develop guidance and tools at scale and have a statewide perspective to understand where innovation is happening. Local leaders are better positioned to identify and respond to the needs of their constituents, which means they are a better “innovation lab” for piloting new programs and approaches. State and local partnerships can multiply impact as **Colorado, Hawaii, Nebraska** and **Tennessee** have shown by leveraging these competitive advantages.

These examples can be instructional to help state leaders enhance program quality and maximize impact. State leaders should consider the following approaches to effectively catalyze local innovation and strengthen partnerships with local leaders.

- **Leverage federal and state funds to fuel local innovation, using state criteria as guidelines for quality.** Perkins V allows states to set aside up to 15 percent of local basic Perkins V grants in a reserve fund, which can be issued competitively or by formula to support innovation in pilot sites. State leaders can also use state funds to design competitive grants to promote innovation and fuel impactful local strategies that can be replicated elsewhere. Once a proof of concept has been demonstrated, other districts and communities can learn by example.
- **Provide meaningful technical assistance to help local administrators identify solutions.** To maximize impact, states should provide technical assistance and guidance that is responsive to the needs of local communities. The technical assistance work should be collaborative and begin with defining the work of all parties to ensure that state and local partners are grounded in shared definitions, goals and strategies.
- **Share knowledge, ideas and best practices.** While local program administrators are often best positioned to address the needs in their own communities, state leaders have the expertise and convening power to help local leaders identify proven strategies to overcome challenging barriers. This convening power extends to organizations outside of education, including bringing together local, regional and/or statewide representatives from workforce development and labor.





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The six *New Skills ready network* sites are: Boston, Massachusetts; Columbus, Ohio; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Nashville, Tennessee. These sites are formulating new partnerships between local school systems, higher education, employers and government entities to develop pathways and policy recommendations that give underserved students access to higher education and real-world work experiences that lead to high-wage, in-demand jobs.

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