

Toward the Big Blur

State Governance of a Unified Education-to-Workforce System That Works for Everyone



AT A GLANCE

Jobs for the Future's (JFF) vision for the Big Blur calls for entirely new educational institutions and systems to better prepare 16-to-20-year-olds for college and careers. This paper examines the new type of governance needed to help states create more effective grade 11-14 schools and systems.

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About This Paper

JFF's Big Blur argues for a radical restructuring of education for grades 11-14 by erasing the arbitrary dividing line between high school and college to open opportunities for the learners our current systems leave behind.

We make the case for an entirely new type of public¹ institution, neither high school nor college, designed to better meet the needs of 16-to-20-year-olds by enabling them to earn a postsecondary credential and prepare for a career—free of charge.

This paper outlines the new type of **governance** needed to help states create the more effective grade 11-14 schools and systems envisioned in the Big Blur.

Forthcoming papers will examine incentives, alignment, and staffing.



Fulfilling the Big Blur vision will require seismic shifts in existing state systems and policies, including in these four key areas:



Incentives for accountability and financing to promote new ways of organizing learning



Alignment of high schools, colleges, and labor markets so that 11th-grade students enter new institutional structures focused on postsecondary and career preparation



Governance model that unifies decision-making authority over grades 11-14 as well as over districts and postsecondary institutions that are working as a unified institution



Staffing structures designed to equip specially trained educators and leaders to teach, curate, and organize learning and work experiences and support systems for students in grades 11-14



Introduction

Our young people urgently need a better education-to-workforce system that enables everyone to earn postsecondary credits, learn in-demand skills, launch careers, and realize their best possible futures. Recent educational innovations that have provided high school students with college and career experiences, such as dual enrollment, early college, and career pathways, have been a great success for those who've accessed these opportunities. But let's face it: Only a small fraction of young people can participate.² Managing such programs is costly, and in many places, it's not even possible to develop them because rigid systems and policies get in the way.



A major reason these innovations are slow to scale is the enduring disconnect between high school, higher education, and workforce systems. Their components are governed by conflicting rules set by separate state and federal agencies that oversee multiple funding streams, each with varying resources, goals, accountability targets, and outcomes. The result is a bureaucratic hodgepodge: misaligned high school and college calendars, credit-granting systems, instructor pay scales, and requirements for graduating from one system and entering the other. Overcoming these logistical barriers requires a fleet of liaisons, coordinators, and advisors to bridge between systems.

JFF's solution—[The Big Blur](#)—calls for integrating high school, college, and career education and creating one new grade 11-14 system that works well for everyone. One essential step to achieving the Big Blur vision is restructuring state governance models that oversee secondary, postsecondary, and workforce systems. We use “governance” to refer to the ways a state creates intentional policy structures, priorities, and resources for efforts supporting 16-to-20-year-olds—especially decision-making authority—to reach its goals.

Governance

Specifically, we propose a **new codified model of governance that empowers a state cabinet-level decision maker with authority over a new, unified grade 11-14 system.**

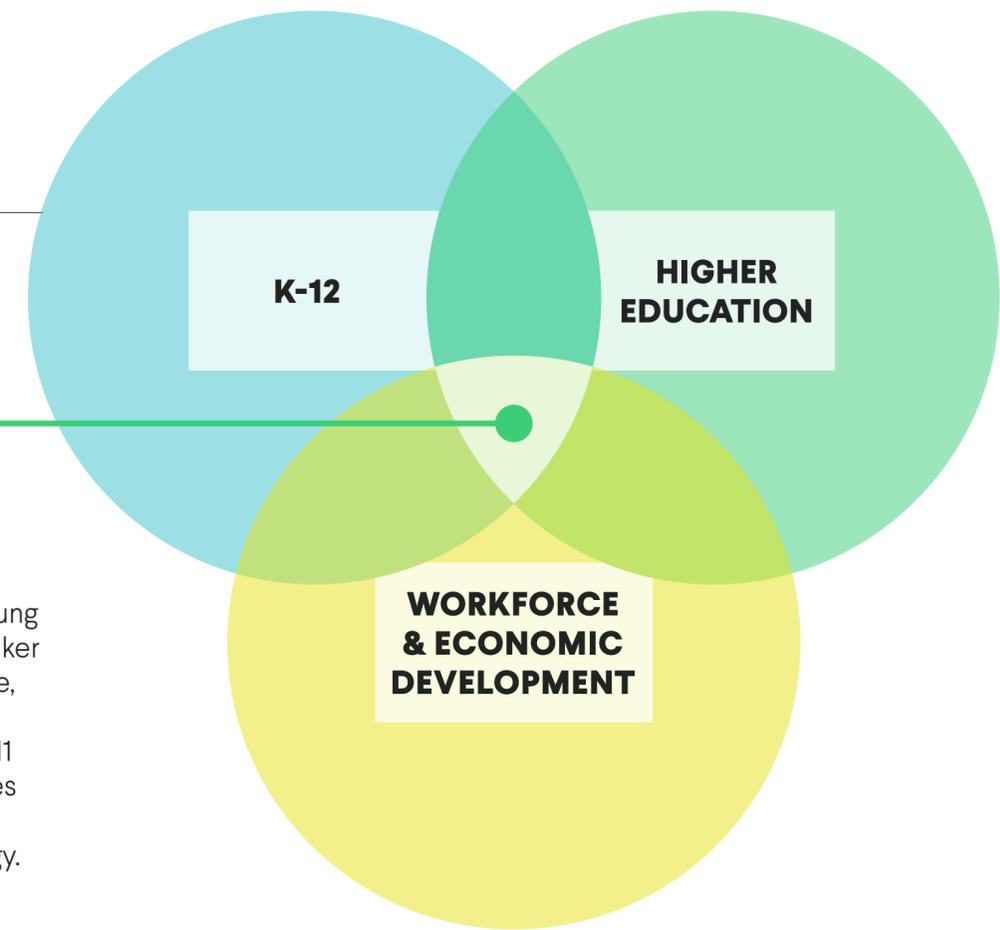
An education and workforce team, secretary, or commissioner would oversee, ensure funding for, and support new grade 11-14 institutions aligned with the state’s economic development strategy. The individual or team would unify policies promulgated by the offices of education, higher education, workforce, and economic development as they pertain to and influence the preparation of the state’s future talent pipeline. Career-focused curriculum and work experiences would also be aligned seamlessly, and the measure of success would be students’ near- and longer-term labor market outcomes.

This sort of governance overhaul would not be easy, but if done well, it can drive the momentum needed for systems change and innovation. In this paper, we provide a brief overview of prior efforts to improve governance across systems, highlight innovations to build from, and conclude with a set of state and regional policy suggestions for moving governance toward the Big Blur.

BIG BLUR GOVERNANCE

CABINET-LEVEL DECISION MAKER

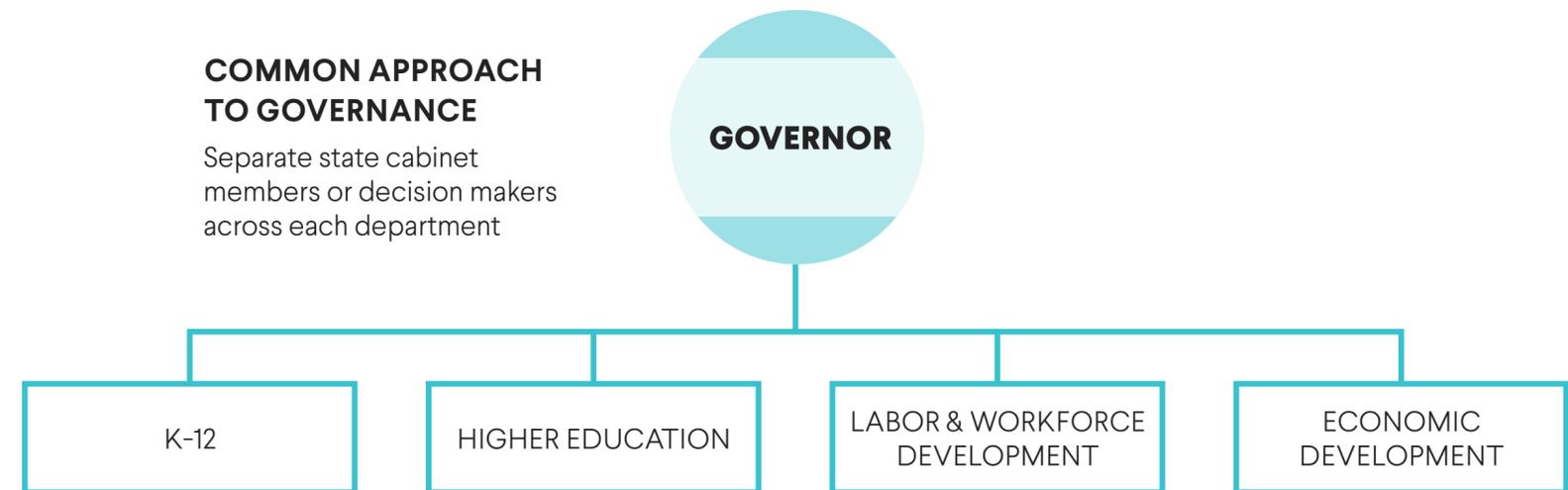
Oversees a system of career readiness and transitions for young people ages 16-20. Decision maker also has the authority to oversee, unify policies, ensure funding for, and support unified grades 11 through 14 institutional structures that are aligned to the state’s economic development strategy.



vs

COMMON APPROACH TO GOVERNANCE

Separate state cabinet members or decision makers across each department





Past Attempts of Improving Governance

Tackling the challenges that arise due to siloed governance is not new. Over the last two decades, many state leaders and cabinet members have attempted to foster stronger collaboration and alignment across systems. Their efforts include the development of P-16 and P-20 councils, dual enrollment task forces, cross-agency initiatives, and assigning one agency, commissioner, or board with responsibility for all the state's public education entities (P-12 through higher education). Governors have also played a vital role in the governance of statewide education and workforce initiatives through the development of key policy agendas. In many states, they have the authority to appoint the education secretary, members of the state board of education, and/or the higher education chancellor or governing boards.³

These and other efforts have yielded some progress and encouraged leaders from across systems to converse periodically about common challenges, goals, and joint solutions to support today's students in achieving academic success and credential attainment.

However, despite some progress, these attempts must go further to support true, sustained, and radical collaboration that enables a clear and unified governance for all education and workforce programming to support 16-to-20-year-olds. Earlier efforts have not significantly fostered stronger connections between disparate systems or eliminated barriers limiting young adults' movement between levels.

For example, analysis of the effectiveness of P-16 and P-20 councils has shown many failed to meet their promise due to lack of sustained funding and staff member capacity to continue cross-collaboration efforts.⁴ Many councils primarily served as advisory boards, lacking authority to make determinations or change system structures or policies, or they have lacked membership of legislators and governors who can push for necessary legislation and funding.⁵ And many councils do not have strong connections to the labor market. Instead, they primarily focus on increasing the number of students who enter a traditional four-year college rather than expanding multiple postsecondary pathways leading toward good careers.

Additionally, states that have developed structures granting one board, commissioner, or agency with sole responsibility for the effectiveness of the state's public education systems (K-12 through higher education) have also struggled to secure true collaboration across secondary and postsecondary systems. New York and Florida are two notable examples. Analysis of the governance structures of these states shows that housing all public education responsibility under one umbrella does not guarantee effective collaboration across sectors, particularly when K-12, higher education, and economic development funding and policies remain disjointed, and therefore accountability for these sectors stays separate.⁶

Movement Toward a Big Blur and Governance

Unlike earlier attempts at collaborative governance (such as the P-16 and P-20 councils), JFF's vision goes far beyond joint advisory meetings, just-in-time problem solving, and vision and goal setting on improving college access and postsecondary completion. Governance for the Big Blur calls for developing a new governing body specifically overseeing all programming supporting 16-to-20-year-olds. Such authority held by a senior leader would enable development of a unified plan for supporting young adults' economic success and have the decision-making power to make key policy decisions, maneuver resources, and track and report key information on program outcomes. Such a structure or leader would also be accountable for outcomes, including initial employment of young people. The structure must be sustainable and outlast changes of political parties.

While no state or region currently implements governance adhering to JFF's Big Blur vision, we've gathered notable and innovative examples going beyond the common approaches of governance referenced above and toward the Big Blur direction.



The examples show K-12, higher education, and/or workforce systems intentionally collaborating, sharing resources, making collective decisions on the administration of program resources, and, in some cases, taking responsibility for the same groups of students. These examples signal that moving toward an ideal Big Blur governance is feasible.

Should the United States Implement a Youth Guarantee Like the EU's?

Could a unified governance for grades 11-14 be the catalyst needed to launch a youth guarantee across the United States or vice versa?

Now is a critical time for the United States to take a closer look at how other countries have approached youth guarantees, which are both structural reforms to drastically improve school-to-work transitions and a measure to immediately support jobs for young people.

In April 2013, European Union member states committed to supporting young people's successful transition into work by establishing Youth Guarantees. Under the reinforced [Youth Guarantee](#) (2020), member states ensure that, within four months of leaving school or losing a job, young people under 30 can either find a good-quality job suited to their education, skills, and experience or acquire the education, skills, and experience required to find a job in the future through an apprenticeship, traineeship, or continued education.⁷

Massachusetts Early College Joint Committee



The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and Board of Higher Education (BHE) recognized that college success was a challenge facing their state, and neither entity could solve the problem alone. In 2017, they developed a joint resolution recognizing how early college programs can improve educational attainment rates across the state, particularly for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.⁸ The resolution also established the Early College Joint Committee (ECJC), comprised of two voting members from the BESE and BHE as well as the state secretary of education (who is appointed by the governor). The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and Department of Higher Education commissioners also sit on the ECJC but do not vote, and each has a senior staff member devoted to early college work.

The ECJC demonstrates a deeper form of collaborative governance because the group meets regularly and co-governs Massachusetts' Early College Initiative by jointly setting policy and rules governing the initiative's structure.⁹ It works together to determine the criteria and approval processes for early college applicants and makes collective decisions on using the state's early college funding.

At this writing, the ECJC is also carrying out a strategic policy review of Massachusetts' Early College Initiative addressing six main topic areas (designation, program quality and accountability, data, governance and staffing, funding, and supportive ecosystem). Members of the legislature and advocates, including the Massachusetts Alliance for Early College, have introduced and supported a bill to codify early college in state law, including through the continuation of strong cross-agency collaboration and governance.



North Carolina's Cooperative Innovative High School



In 2004, North Carolina's General Assembly established Cooperative Innovative High Schools (CIHS), which are public high schools located on a community college or university campus that target students at risk of not graduating, first-generation college students, and students who would benefit from accelerated learning.¹⁰ CIHS programming makes strong connections to regional labor markets. Students can earn postsecondary credits that transfer to in-state four-year degree programs, and many of today's newer CIHSs are deliberate in exposing students to specific career fields, including health sciences, STEM, advanced manufacturing, or welding. The career-focused schools' expanded scope draws employers and businesses to be strong partners, ensuring students can access in-demand jobs after completing their associate's degrees.

CIHSs demonstrate a deeper form of collaborative governance because local boards of education and a local college (typically a community college) must jointly apply to develop a school. If the application is accepted, they create a memorandum of understanding to solidify their working relationship. CIHSs are part of the local school district and supported by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and the community college partner is part of the North Carolina Community College System. Both partners have incentives to ensure student participants' success. All districts and state education agencies report data on student enrollment, high school graduation, and college certifications and degrees, with completion as a major goal for all.

The two parties also share a set of resources, which typically includes a college liaison who supports CIHS students in collaboration with CIHS leaders and counselors, as well as navigates and strengthens the relationship between the district and college partner. Funds for this position come from supplemental funding CIHSs receive from the North Carolina General Assembly (in addition to standard state K-12 funds).

Additionally, the state law establishing the CIHS initiative also created a Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) that oversees the CIHSs. The JAC includes members from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (K-12 agency), North Carolina Community College System, University of North Carolina System, and the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities. The JAC differs from many P-16/20 councils because it is codified in law. Members "meet regularly and collaborate to support CIHS throughout the year and to provide oversight and guidance to the program, including technical support, resource development, policy implementation and data collection and analysis."¹¹ Each participating entity contributes a unique set of resources or supports, depending on the corresponding CIHS's needs. Ultimately, the JAC unites leaders across North Carolina's key education systems to ensure the success of the CIHS.

Overall, the CIHS's collaborative governance model has helped CIHSs continue seeing academic outcomes that outperform other student groups across the state.¹²

Texas Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative



In 2016, Texas Governor Greg Abbott established the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative to help boost Texas' economy by increasing postsecondary completion rates and workforce readiness. It brought together commissioners from the Texas Education Agency, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and Texas Workforce Commission. In 2020, Abbott tasked the group with developing strategies for addressing Texas' workforce needs. Today, the tri-agencies have the following core priorities: 1) supporting efficient pathways toward credential attainment, 2) ensuring students receive robust supports, and 3) creating the infrastructure for interagency collaboration around common goals, data, and processes.

Their third priority, in particular, demonstrates how the state is moving beyond general coordination across systems and toward deeper collaboration by building infrastructure for stronger partnerships. This includes efforts aimed at aligning financing to support tri-agency efforts (including braiding resources), working toward shared outcomes across agencies, and adopting shared processes to monitor progress and coordinate public communications.¹³

In 2021, the Texas legislature passed the Texas Education and Workforce Alignment Act, or House Bill 3767, to formally codify the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative and identify specific measures to align Texas' education and workforce development efforts.¹⁴ Since then, the three agencies co-developed a strategic framework focused on scaling and improving the quality of work-based learning across the state. The framework provides “program implementation, quality assurances, accountability, and support mechanisms for program providers, including streamlined data collection, cross-sector partnerships, and funding options.”¹⁵ They also closely collaborated on a statewide grant opportunity to establish “regional conveners” across Texas to bring together core partners across education, workforce, and community-based organizations to support effective regional pathway approaches for young adults.¹⁶ In April 2023, the Tri-Agency announced the selection of the regional convenor awardees.¹⁷

State Policy Suggestions

Policy is critical in developing and influencing the systems and structures that best support older adolescents' success in postsecondary education and careers. State leaders should consider exploring new ideas and strategies, like the two policy suggestions below, to transform today's siloed systems into a more aligned and unified governance across key programs.

New Ways of Administering Existing Resources

Funding is a strong tool for determining programmatic behavior and dictating what can or cannot be done. When funding and resources are limited and siloed, education and workforce systems and programs are often deterred from aligning their efforts and engaging in deeper collaboration. Also, efforts and intended goals can be duplicated across programs serving the same types of students but supported by separate funding streams. These dynamics can also result in a perceived “zero-sum” mentality.

To address these challenges and move toward the unified governance system proposed by the Big Blur, states may consider seeking ways (by legislation or rules) to improve the governance of existing programs that support 16-to-20-year-olds by restructuring those programs' financing to provide incentives for true collaboration, flexibility, and shared accountability across systems. P-16/20 councils typically bring together cross-system leaders to set joint goals within an entrenched siloed context.

By contrast, the below approach closely examines finances as a key vehicle for moving toward unified and strengthened governance since we know action follows dollars.

To begin administering existing resources in new ways, a state may first develop a cabinet- or principal-level cross-sector taskforce, committee, or team tasked with building financial infrastructure for unified governance. We will call this group the “team.” To start, the team may develop a shared understanding of all the state's projects, initiatives, and funding streams that support 16-to-20-year-olds and aim to align programming across secondary, postsecondary, and workforce (for example, dual and concurrent enrollment, P-TECH, career and technical education, or summer employment programs). This process can also include noting duplicative efforts or identifying gaps in services that young people need to thrive in postsecondary education and the workforce.

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11 ▶ *NEW WAYS OF ADMINISTERING EXISTING RESOURCES*

Next, the team may develop a shared mission, vision, and/or goals for consolidating and aligning core funding streams and programs. It could also determine key definitions and accountability metrics for a larger pot of funds supporting the state’s education and workforce goals and priorities for 16-to-20-year-olds. This could include developing a near-term plan to consolidate two to three state funding streams and a longer-term plan to integrate all funding streams supporting 16-to-20-year-olds in their postsecondary and career pursuits.

From here or simultaneously, the state may seek ways to codify the team and/or assign an empowered secretary or commissioner with decision-making authority over the new consolidated funds to oversee the work moving forward. The ultimate goal is streamlining full authority over these programs, so resources, policy decisions, and accountability for young people’s postsecondary and career success fall with one key decision maker or designated team.

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EXAMPLE YEAR-BY-YEAR PLAN

The team develops a shared mission, vision, and/or goals for working together and consolidating and aligning core programs. It determines definitions and accountability metrics for consolidated resources supporting 16-to-20-year-olds. The team also plans to consolidate and align a subset of state funding streams.

YEAR TWO

The team and empowered secretary or commissioner implement the pilot and evaluate and track progress and outcomes.

YEARS THREE, FOUR, AND FIVE

The team and empowered secretary or commissioner track progress and outcomes and report data to the state and public for continuous improvement and transparency.

YEAR SIX AND BEYOND

YEAR ONE

The state creates a taskforce, committee, or team to build the infrastructure for unified governance. The team develops a shared understanding of all projects, initiatives, and funding streams that support 16-to-20-year-olds and wants to align programming across secondary, postsecondary, and workforce.

YEARS TWO AND THREE

The state codifies the team and/or assigns an empowered secretary or commissioner with decision-making authority over this effort and, ultimately, the new consolidated funds to ensure sustainability and success.

YEAR FIVE

The team and empowered secretary or commissioner build from the pilot and fully consolidate and align all state resources supporting the postsecondary and career success of 16-to-20-year-olds.

This policy suggestion differs from prior attempts at improving governance by getting to the crux of what stifles deeper cross-sector collaboration and unified governance—financing and accountability. Providing sliding-scale financial incentives (as listed in the example year-by-year plan) may ease a “zero-sum” mentality by helping leaders across siloed programs understand what is and is not working. They may also voice opinions on where financing structures go. The gradual process and help with buy-in ensure individual program budgets are not cut off abruptly. Funding changes gradually toward a collective, flexible, and consolidated pot rather than myriad separate pots.

This approach can enable systems to use resources more effectively and efficiently while also holding cross-sector leaders accountable for statewide defined and shared postsecondary and career outcomes for young adults through a unified governance structure.



Aligning Programs for Young Adults Across the State

In 2022, Colorado developed a cross-sector Secondary, Postsecondary, and Work-Based Learning Integration Taskforce to examine the roughly nine programs across the state intended to support students in accessing early postsecondary opportunities and obtaining credentials while in high school. The taskforce reviews each program's financing structures, outcomes, opportunities, and challenges while developing and recommending "policies, laws, and rules to support the equitable and sustainable expansion and alignment of programs that integrate secondary, postsecondary and work-based learning opportunities in every region of the state."¹⁸ Colorado's efforts to closely examine all its programs supporting young adults are a step in the right direction. If harnessed properly, this step could be a catalyst for streamlining approaches, bettering financing and accountability, closing equity gaps, and, ultimately, improving governance approach.



Innovative Pilots for Unified Governance

Governments test the effectiveness of new approaches and innovations using pilot programs. Policymakers could invest in a pilot program to develop unified governance and a deeper form of collaboration for educational and workforce efforts supporting 16-to-20-year-olds. The pilot could provide a new stream of funds for a consortium to work toward successfully integrating and aligning the last two years of high school and the first two years of postsecondary. It would aim to ensure young people earn a postsecondary credential with value in the labor market by the time they reach 20.

Consortia should include multiple local education agencies, institution(s) of higher education, employers, workforce development entities, and local and regional intermediaries.

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Participating parties should develop a memorandum of understanding regarding the shared responsibility of work, which may include:

- **Developing a clear** definition of a shared problem that motivates consortia partners
- **Cocreating strategic goals** and defining their shared scope of work
- **Developing a mutual understanding** of each sector’s terminology and working collaboratively to establish clear definitions of terms such as “career pathway,” “career lattice or ladder,” “living wage,” or “career ready or employable”
- **Developing a plan** for how to administer the dedicated resources provided via the pilot as well as weaving together existing programs and funding sources (that is, stimulus funds and other federal, state, and local funding sources) that support the educational and career success of 16-to-20-year-olds.
- **Developing a plan** for establishing or using existing data systems built on postsecondary student outcomes, including labor market outcomes disaggregated by student demographics
- **Executing those plans** and reporting progress and outcomes data back to the state, including young adults’ workforce outcomes for at least six years after grade 14, encompassing data on high school graduation rates, community college graduation rates, credential attainment, four-year degree completion rates, programs of study, placement into related jobs and career fields, and wages

Unlike other attempts at unified governance, such as P-16 and P-20 councils, pilot programs accompanied by a new set of resources can provide partners with a clean slate when determining shared goals, challenges, roles, and responsibilities. Partners can also make collective decisions on funding administration and the support and resources each party will contribute to the work. The goal should be for partners to be more than just group members who meet regularly. They should become active participants with dedicated staff members offering support, expertise, and/or other assistance, who are held accountable for program participants’ educational and career development.

Pilots also allow a state to test new things and replicate lessons statewide to support even greater impact.

Looking Ahead

The stakes are high. If K-12, higher education, workforce, and economic development continue working separately or unite without joint decision-making power, resources, and shared accountability, then young people will continue experiencing a high school diploma as an end when it must be a step on the route to a viable career.

Luckily, most states do not have to start from scratch to improve governance across education and workforce systems. States can reexamine their prior governance efforts' successes and shortcomings while also learning from other states' attempts to establish sustained forms of governance improving young adults' postsecondary and career outcomes.



Endnotes

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