



Framework for the Design and Implementation of College and Career Pathways in Rural Communities

Introduction

Young people need both cross-cutting skills and specialized knowledge to thrive in our rapidly changing economy, and business and industry leaders require fresh talent to innovate and grow. Pathways are a strategy to connect education with careers to meet the needs of youth, educators, and employers and create a more thriving and equitable economy. College and career pathways expand economic opportunity for all young people and meet regional talent needs. This forward-looking approach depends on strong cross-sector partnerships that mobilize K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce and economic development, policymakers, and businesses, bringing together diverse stakeholders to build a future that works.

Pathways that respond to the unique needs of—and opportunities in—rural communities are a critical strategy to support youth and advance economic development. This framework outlines key considerations and promising strategies for pathways leaders who seek to achieve equitable outcomes for youth while strengthening rural communities.

The contents of this framework were developed under the U.S. Department of Education's Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grant program. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

01. Build on Local Strengths and Context

A history of collaboration to support the community and a foundation of trust are important strengths of many rural communities. These characteristics give rural communities an advantage as they mobilize the partnerships across sectors that are the cornerstone of successful pathways initiatives.

Promising Strategies



Create a shared vision.

A key first step in pathways implementation is bringing together stakeholders across multiple sectors—including K-12 and postsecondary education, business and industry, workforce and economic development, and government—to create a shared vision for success and for pathways as a critical strategy to support positive youth development and community prosperity. Longstanding relationships and partnerships can accelerate the development and adoption of this shared vision.



Align efforts and establish shared infrastructure.

Pathways can align and use existing programs and initiatives by constructing shared infrastructure and considering opportunities to pool existing resources, strategies backed by the history of trust and collaboration in many rural communities.



Foster durable relationships.

A shared vision and infrastructure help ensure that pathways are built not only on personal relationships between leaders but also on a solid foundation of partnerships across organizations and systems.

02. Prioritize Inclusive Economic Development

Pathways contribute to talent pipelines that align with regional labor markets and adapt to internal and/or external shocks. Rural communities can create strong economies that work for everyone by adopting strategies that encourage resilience and advance shared prosperity.

Promising Strategies



Focus on quality jobs.

Embracing quality job strategies in pathways plans is a route to addressing common challenges in rural communities, including a limited employer base and the prevalence of jobs that do not pay living wages. This can include working with business and industry partners to make existing jobs quality jobs, as well as strategies for developing a skilled talent pipeline for industries such as health care and manufacturing that offer quality jobs and often operate in rural areas but struggle to find qualified workers. Strong talent pipelines can also attract new employers and create new career opportunities for community residents.



Ensure an inclusive process and outcomes.

Collaboration and partnerships can drive an approach to economic development that addresses both community and industry needs instead of setting them up in opposition to each other. Inclusive processes that engage diverse community perspectives—including those of learners, workers, and employers—ensure that pathways strengthen communities and economies and lead to more equitable outcomes.



Invest in local assets.

Pathways can be an important component of economic development strategies that drive growth by investing locally. Cross-sector partners can collaboratively set investment priorities benefiting community members and utilizing existing assets, such as location, environmental resources, and local industries. This approach to economic development yields long-term gains by building vibrant communities that retain existing residents and attract new ones.

03. Embed Remote Opportunities

Geographic distance does not have to mean distance from education and employment opportunities. Rural communities can take advantage of online and remote education and work opportunities to build high-quality pathways that let residents remain in their communities.

Promising Strategies



Offer online dual enrollment.

Building a skilled rural workforce includes increasing postsecondary attainment rates in communities where geographic distance from college campuses can hinder postsecondary enrollment and completion. Offering online dual enrollment to high school students puts them on a path to postsecondary credentials and degrees and allows them to “try on” college-going while eliminating the challenge of physical distance.



Develop remote work-based learning experiences.

As the number of jobs that can be performed remotely has increased, so has the number of opportunities to design work-based learning experiences in which participants perform job tasks remotely, just as professionals in the field do. By providing remote work-based learning opportunities, rural pathways leaders can increase the quantity of available work-based learning experiences, expand business partnerships, and diversify the industry focus of pathways initiatives.



Support remote workers and work opportunities.

Pathways leaders can advocate for investments in infrastructure, such as broadband access, to support remote workers. This opens opportunities for existing and potential new community residents who appreciate the quality of life in rural communities to live in those communities and contribute to their economies while pursuing varied careers.