



How State Policy Can Transform Career Navigation for Young People: A 50-State Analysis

AT A GLANCE

This report highlights the need for states to build more effective career navigation systems to better meet the needs of all young people and analyzes the extent to which each state has enacted the policies necessary to achieve that goal.

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About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. www.jff.org.

About the ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF

The [ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF](#) empowers young people ages 16-24 to better understand and navigate quality education and career pathways after high school by providing access to resources and opportunities that will lead them to meaningful, quality jobs.

Executive Summary

The Challenge

Today's education-to-career ecosystem is too complex to navigate and lacks a supportive policy infrastructure for exposing students to the world of work and empowering them to make informed choices about their education and career options and advance along their desired pathways. Our education and workforce training landscapes are flooded with more than 1 million credentials and numerous postsecondary and career paths.¹ This pathway choice overload makes it difficult for young people to understand their options, assess their suitability, acquire relevant skills, and navigate their careers effectively.

Federal and state leaders are increasingly interested in supporting young people in achieving workforce readiness, but have largely failed to put into place a comprehensive career

navigation system that operates across K-12, postsecondary, workforce development, industry and business, and community settings to help young people find information about, funding for, and access to a variety of education and workforce pathways that allow them to meet their full potential and advance in their chosen career. Instead, organizations that support career navigation are typically spread out across these different settings, which are all governed by different actors, systems, incentives, and policies. They lack the connective tissue to meaningfully intersect, align their supports, and incorporate quality features. This makes it difficult for young people to make sense of and pursue meaningful postsecondary and career pathways that move them closer to their goals.



The Solution

An ideal 21st-century career navigation system operating at the state level should [align and integrate services and supports](#) across these settings to help young people ages 16-24 access key information, use available financial supports, and pursue education and workforce pathways that are meaningfully connected to their chosen career. To be effective in meeting young people's needs, we believe state career navigation systems should incorporate the following four key components:



Actionable information that gives young people access to high-quality information about postsecondary and career opportunities to make informed choices about their future.



Personalized guidance supported by well-trained career coaches (such as career navigators, guidance counselors, counselors, instructors, mentors) who help young people gain clarity on their education and career goals, acquire critical career navigation skills, and choose from the vast array of available postsecondary education and training programs.



Work-based learning opportunities that bridge the gap between education and employment by giving young people in secondary and postsecondary settings hands-on exposure and experience in the workplace to inform their career pathways and build practical skills that are directly applicable in the workforce.



Short-term credentials that enable students to rapidly build job-related skills that are in demand within the labor market and can stack toward the completion of college degrees needed for career advancement.

About This Report

This policy landscape is the first comprehensive scan examining the extent to which states have adopted robust policies to support the development of an ideal career navigation system that includes the above key components. For each component, we identified specific policies that we believe are critical to supporting that piece of an effective career navigation system.

We selected 19 policies in all, based on input from leading practitioners across secondary, postsecondary, workforce, and community settings; national policy organizations; and policymakers. To determine the extent to which each state has enacted these policies, we reviewed rigorous, publicly available 50-state policy scans (inclusive of the District of Columbia) on related topics and consolidated the information. We also used a variety of other sources to find examples of promising approaches to career navigation policy that were not part of the 50-state scans. (For a detailed methodology, please see the appendix.)

This report aims to provide state policy leaders and other stakeholders with a view of states' adoption of career navigation policies that adhere to the highest levels of quality and rigor for ensuring career navigation systems meet the needs of young people ages 16-24. We hope the scan will encourage state leaders and the

broader field to consider the supports and conditions required for truly effective career navigation systems, enabling individualized support for young people on their education and career paths.

In the introduction, we discuss the challenges that young people face in navigating education and workforce systems, make the case for why policymakers should care, and propose how a comprehensive career navigation system would better meet young people's needs. The next section details how policy can catalyze advancements in career navigation. We then review the 19 policies that are critical for the development of effective state career navigation systems and examine how policy alignment across the four key components sets a strong foundation for continued progress. The following sections describe each of the four key components in greater detail and list the specific policies that align with each component.

We then provide an overview of the scan's key findings, based on states' adoption of the critical policies within each of the four components.

Key Findings

1. **Limited Adoption of Key Policies:** *Few states have adopted a majority of the policies we believe contribute to a comprehensive and effective career navigation system.*
2. **Incomplete Utilization of Policy Components:** *States haven't fully leveraged the vast array of policies available to them within each of the four components to foster the development of a comprehensive and effective career navigation system.*
3. **Advancements in Funding and Incentives:** *States have made the most progress on increasing state funding and financial incentives for work-based learning opportunities and short-term credentials.*
4. **Gaps in Policy Implementation:** *States have lagged in adopting policies that codify quality standards, incentivize cross-system partnerships, and ensure robust data analysis.*

The next four sections of the paper provide detailed findings for each of the scan's four components, while the final section of the paper describes several promising trends in career navigation policy that we found from other sources. The appendix contains a description of our methodology.

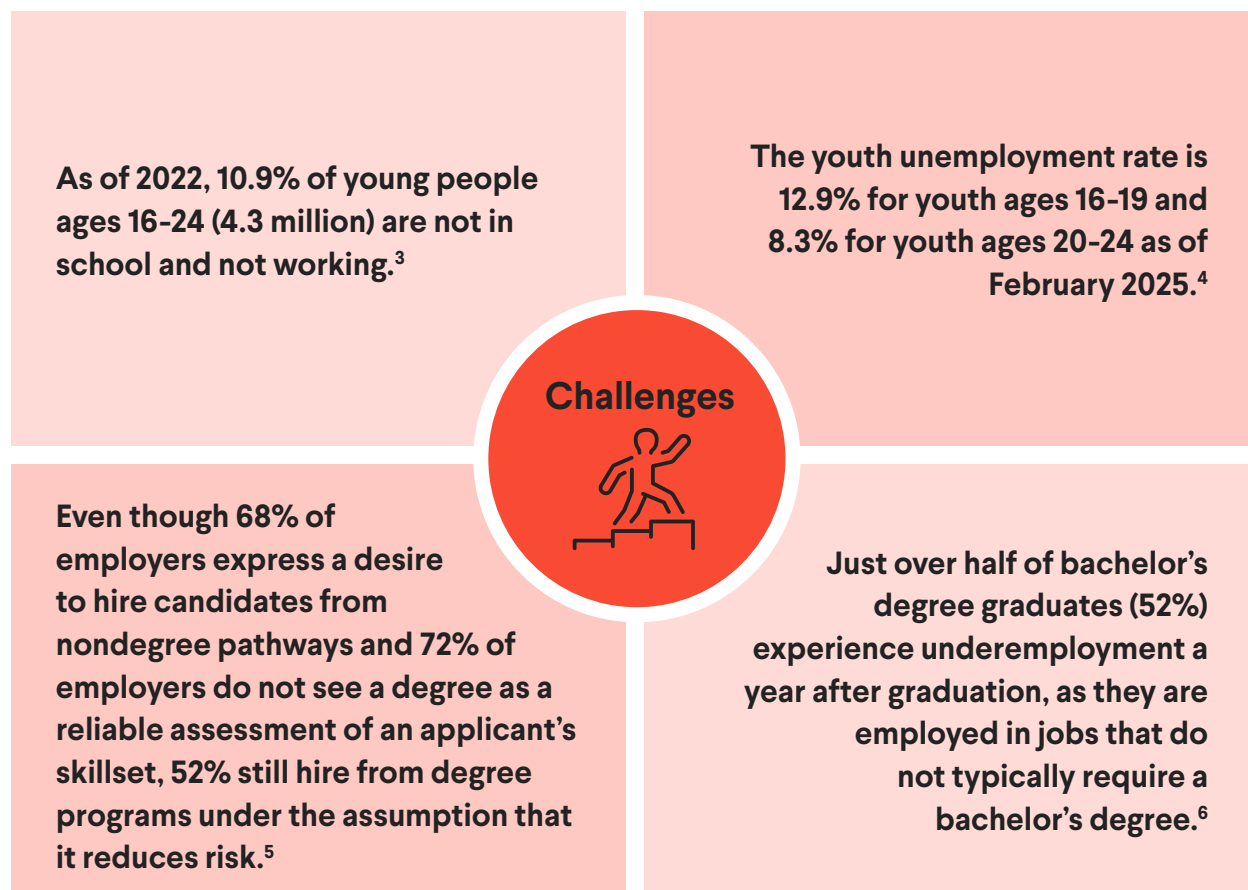
While states have not yet adopted most of the best-in-class policies that could lead to the development of a comprehensive career navigation system that meets the needs of all young people ages 16-24, we are encouraged to see promising state examples across the key components we've identified.



Introduction

The Challenges Facing Young People Ages 16-24

Far too many young people leave high school without clarity on how to navigate their career options and choose from among the vast array of available postsecondary education and training programs that may prepare them for the world of work. A recent survey commissioned by ASA and JFF found only 47% of Gen Z members interviewed said they had enough information to decide the best plan for themselves after high school, and 65% said they “fear there is too much risk associated with choosing the wrong nondegree, postsecondary path.”² The process of exploring occupations, choosing and accessing a career path, and applying for jobs can feel chaotic and confusing, and the results are often unsatisfying for young people who lack direct exposure to work experiences, professional networks, financial assistance, and individualized support to enter career fields that are personally and economically rewarding. Further exacerbating these challenges are the following conditions:



Most young people encounter these challenges by no fault of their own, but instead due in large part to a lack of policy prioritization, coordination, and investment through our nation's education and workforce systems in support of comprehensive career navigation. Career navigation practitioners—high school guidance counselors, youth workforce development professionals, mentors, postsecondary career counselors, and others—increasingly confront a dynamic youth population with growing interest in new pathways to job security and a rapidly changing labor market where individuals without degrees still can springboard ahead. However, more than 40% of career navigation practitioners surveyed by Morning Consult for ASA and JFF reported that they were “not at all confident” or “only somewhat confident” in helping learners navigate “nontraditional” career pathways, which do not follow the typical high-school-to-four-year-degree route.⁷

Policymakers should focus on improving career navigation services because the consequences of inaction are profound, regardless of which pathways young people choose, including the ongoing misalignment between talent pipelines, jobseeker and student career interests, and job vacancies. With 41 out of 50 states facing labor shortages⁸ and more than 7.6 million job openings as of December 2024⁹, many jobs that offer good pay and benefits remain unfilled due to a lack of awareness about the openings or a lack of access to necessary education and training.

Further, the 2023 U.S. economy could have grown by 1.6 percent more (as much as \$442 billion) if U.S. companies had found the right workers.¹⁰ Many key industries, like construction and behavioral health, face ongoing shortages.¹¹ One study estimated that the manufacturing skills gap alone could cost more than \$1 trillion annually by 2030.^{xii}¹² In addition to slowing economic growth, this inaction also can affect the nation's ability to support rising government expenditures as the population ages.¹³

By 2031, 72% of U.S. jobs will require some form of postsecondary education and training.¹⁴ But not all of these jobs will require a college degree. Several million entry-level “launchpad” job openings for nondegree workers can offer job security and opportunities for upward economic mobility.¹⁵ Young people need better information on where various education and training opportunities can lead, and which entry-level jobs provide opportunities to develop transferable skills that lead to career advancement and which don't.



What Works

Fortunately, research shows the effectiveness of various approaches that support a young person's career navigation journey, which include access to actionable data, personalized guidance, work-based learning opportunities, and short-term credential programs. For example, a Workforce Investment Act Gold Standard evaluation found that intensive one-on-one services—such as assessments, coaching, career counseling, and service referrals—increased earnings over a three-year follow-up period, benefiting taxpayers and society.¹⁶ High-quality apprenticeships combining on-the-job training with classroom learning provide employers with robust value, with the typical employer seeing a 44% return on investment through increased productivity, reduced costs, and innovation.¹⁷ CareerWise Colorado's youth apprenticeship program has demonstrated that 64% of young people complete the program and transition into postsecondary education and/or work opportunities.¹⁸

Several other work-based learning models also have proven effective at increasing wages and credential attainment and reducing unemployment.¹⁹ For example, Year Up United, which offers training and internship opportunities for young adults without a college degree, has demonstrated that six years after graduation from their program, participants' average earnings were 30% higher than a control group, leading to more than \$8,000 in additional earnings per year.²⁰ A recent report examining short-term credential offerings by community colleges in Virginia and Louisiana found that students who completed these programs and secured credentials experienced an immediate annual wage increase between 19% and 24%.²¹

A photograph of four young people in a hallway. A young man with a blue backpack is in the center, talking to a young woman with long dark hair on his right. To his left, a young woman with blonde hair in a bun is looking towards him. On the far right, a young man with curly hair is also part of the conversation. They are all smiling and appear to be in a casual, friendly interaction.

What Is Career Navigation?

The [ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF](#) defines career navigation as a lifelong, nonlinear process of engaging in a set of interconnected activities—such as exploration, planning, skill development, and career advancement—to make informed decisions that lead to quality jobs and a sustainable career pathway in a dynamic economic landscape. It requires both self-direction and resources from education, career, and social ecosystems, ensuring individuals can adapt to changing circumstances, access opportunities, and successfully progress in their careers.

We believe that the five core principles for effective career navigation are:

- 1. Lifelong and Nonlinear Progression in a Dynamic Economic Landscape:** Career navigation is an ongoing process whereby individuals move through education, training, and jobs in dynamic, non-sequential ways, and as they do so, they are continually responding to labor market, technological, and other economic and social shifts.
- 2. Individual Agency and Access to Ecosystem-Based Resources Matter:** While career decisions are inherently personal, individuals need access to relevant education, career, and social ecosystems and guidance to navigate the systems involved.
- 3. Informed Decision-Making:** Individuals need access to clear, transparent, and relevant education and career information to make choices that align with their goals, skills, and labor market realities.
- 4. Power of Relationships and Networks:** Professional and social networks are critical assets that can broaden the opportunities available to individuals navigating their career journey and can support career pivots, advancement, and long-term success.
- 5. Career Navigation Happens in Many Different Ways:** People receive formal and informal guidance and support in navigating their careers in a wide array of education, career, and social spaces.

To promote a mature career navigation system that achieves the core principles of effective career navigation (see “What is Career Navigation?”), support and coordination are needed across federal, state, and local policy to ensure that America’s young people can make informed decisions about their futures and position themselves to respond to the challenging economic environment. Such a comprehensive career navigation system would be operational across key K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and community stakeholders. It would include actionable, high-quality labor market information and program-outcome data and would ensure young people receive personalized guidance that is delivered by well-trained career coaches and supported by technological tools. It would provide career-connected learning that enables young people to experience a sequence of developmentally appropriate, progressive, and meaningful, paid work-based learning opportunities. And it would provide young people with information

about, funding for, and access to a variety of postsecondary opportunities, including short-term workforce programs and other nondegree options. All of these components are critical to ensuring that the next generation can access a career navigation infrastructure that helps them advance in their chosen career.

Ultimately, the choice of which career path to follow must belong to the young person. Policy redesign should center people by promoting services that support an individual’s goals and interests as well as their skill sets and experiences. Education and workforce systems bear the responsibility of transparently explaining education and employment options, providing accurate information about in-demand careers, and detailing the return on investment of postsecondary options to guide decision-making. They should support individual choice and agency and not place individuals into certain paths based on their educational or socioeconomic background.



Policy's Role in Catalyzing a Comprehensive Career Navigation System

Policy is crucial in creating and maintaining a systems transformation approach for career navigation that benefits young people, employers, and the economy. The development of such a system will require policy action across four main components that are interconnected and critical for learners to find, evaluate, access, and pay for high-quality education and training programs that help them realize their goals. These components, which are described in more detail below, include a focus on the availability and quality of actionable information, personalized career guidance, work-based learning, and short-term credentials.

Policymakers will need to take a comprehensive approach across each of these components to ensure the proper resources, incentives, and cross-system supports are in place. This comprehensive approach is needed because effective career navigation will not take hold if policymakers focus on just one aspect of their career navigation system, such as expanding access to actionable information about education and workforce opportunities, without increasing opportunities to access a

range of postsecondary opportunities that lead to good jobs. Alternatively, young people will lack high-quality personalized career guidance if policymakers merely increase the number of guidance counselors in schools but fail to provide targeted professional development opportunities.

Moreover, policy can create the necessary conditions to transform fragmented efforts into a cohesive, high-impact system.



Specifically, policy can:

- Ý **Align systems:** *Require and encourage collaboration among education systems, workforce development programs, and industry leaders to ensure career navigation initiatives are integrated, outcome-driven, and responsive to young people's and labor market needs.*
- Ý **Catalyze innovation and accountability:** *Set standards for transparency, quality, and accountability, promoting data-driven approaches to improve program effectiveness and outcomes of career navigation programs.*
- Ý **Drive scale through investment and best-practice adoption:** *Provide sustainable funding and strategic investments to expand proven career navigation models and widespread adoption across states and industries.*
- Ý **Acknowledge and adapt to context:** *Recognize that state contexts vary, and effective policies should incentivize stakeholders to respond to local factors and prioritize the needs of young people and employers.*

By prioritizing policy solutions that are intentionally aligned to foster collaboration, ensure accountability, scale investment, and prioritize local context, policymakers can build career navigation systems that empower individuals, support economic growth, and meet the workforce demands of the future.

The State’s Role in Catalyzing a Comprehensive Career Navigation System

Policy action is needed at the federal, state, and local level to improve career navigation systems. Although federal and local policy play an important role in a young person’s career navigation experience, these areas will not be explored deeply in this piece. Currently, we consider the state level as being the ripest for innovative and contextualized policy action that would impact local and regional practice. It also likely could be adopted faster than federal policy. In addition, there’s robust appetite at the state level, with more than half of governor-appointed workforce development policymakers in 34 states recently raising career navigation as an essential piece of statewide efforts to help young people advance in their careers.²²

State policymakers have multiple types of policies at their disposal that, when put in place collectively and implemented with fidelity, can ensure young people have access to the full range of supports they need to make informed decisions about their economic futures. It is the interconnectedness and alignment of the policies combined that can set a strong foundation for effective career navigation systems.

Definitions and standards	<i>States can establish clear, overarching visions for their work by codifying definitions for key areas of interest, such as work-based learning, apprenticeships, or short-term credentials. These definitions can help set a list of activities that would fall within these areas, providing a foundation for other necessary policies and informing local decision-making. Moreover, states can set clear and rigorous expectations for the quality of critical services, including data collected, the role and performance of career navigation providers (such as career coaches), and the outcomes expected for publicly funded programs and providers.</i>
Professional development	<i>States can provide access to training and other capacity supports that ensure career navigation practitioners are fully able to implement critical supports, such as counseling and advising, in adherence to quality standards.</i>

Financial incentives and funding	<i>States can incentivize public and private entities to take certain actions, such as rewarding educational institutions for achieving certain outcomes and offering tax credits to employers who provide work-based learning opportunities like apprenticeships or internships. States also can use current or new funding streams that go to students directly or to the institutions that support them to expand access to career navigation services and experiences.</i>
Statewide infrastructure support	<i>States can develop critical infrastructure that facilitates partnerships between education providers, employers, and workforce entities that lead to work-based learning experiences, industry-informed career counseling, or demand-driven credential programs. States also can improve the capabilities of their data systems and build tech-enabled platforms to better provide current and useful information about education and employment outcomes for various degrees, credentials, and other programs and understand which programs and practices are working, for whom, and under what context.</i>

While each of these policies on its own can have important impacts on young people, it is the interconnectedness and alignment of the policies combined that can help establish a strong foundation for career navigation and, ultimately, positive youth outcomes.

For example, states can establish new funding opportunities for young people and the institutions that serve them, but these opportunities will not lead to results without rigorous quality standards. Counselors and advisors may be well-trained to serve young people in culturally competent ways, but their training will be for naught if they lack data insights and technology platforms that can provide better understanding of the many different systems and sectors that young

people will explore after high school graduation. Employers may wish to take advantage of tax incentives by offering new apprenticeships, but if a state lacks supportive infrastructure that facilitates partnerships between employers, schools, chambers of commerce, and other institutions, then employers may not be able to find the young people who are looking for apprenticeships in their field.

Four Key Components of Policy Action to Support Career Navigation

The four areas we believe states should act on to support a comprehensive career navigation system are:



Actionable information

Every young person needs access to high-quality information about postsecondary and career opportunities to make informed choices about their future. By providing access to easy-to-understand and actionable labor market information and outcome data for different types of education and workforce programs, states can ensure that young people and their families have the information they need to navigate high-stakes education and career choices with confidence. States can also ensure that program providers and policymakers can make more effective and economical decisions by having key data and information, such as how students are progressing through public education and into the workforce, regional labor market needs, and the efficacy of education and skills development programs.

To effectively support students and workers, states can better integrate and publish timely and localized data on education and employment outcomes. This requires that states integrate information on learners' postsecondary choices, earnings, and employment after high school completion, ensuring this data is published and disaggregated. Additionally, states can publish interactive resources containing education-to-opportunity statistics from across systems (such as four-year institutions, community colleges, high schools, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)--eligible training providers) to provide comprehensive information to guide learners' college or career decisions. States can also provide data on nondegree and noncredit postsecondary education and training programs. It is also important for states to have a shared definition of in-demand jobs across education, workforce, and economic development agencies to ensure consistency in tracking outcomes across key systems.

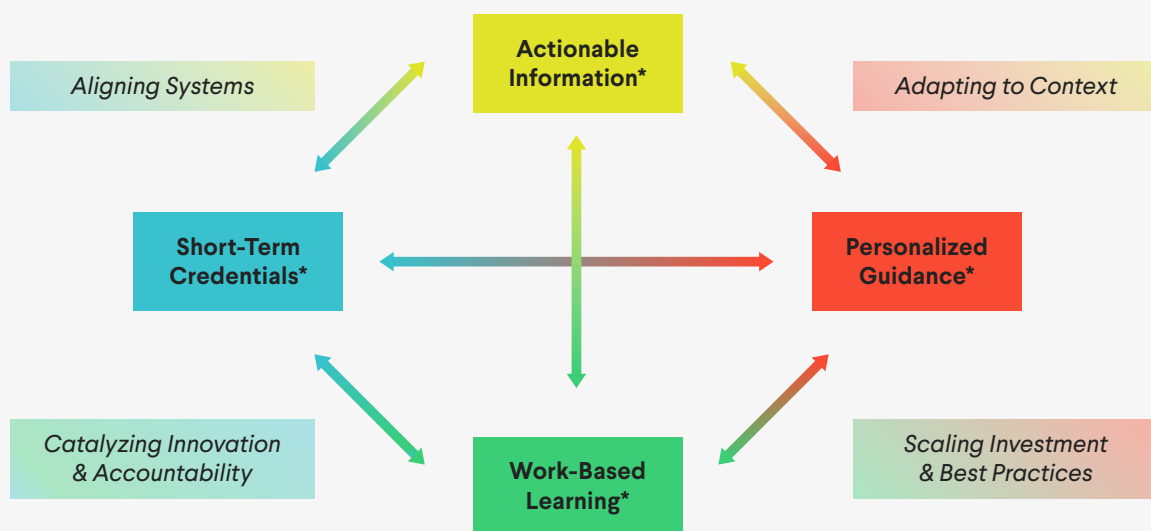


Personalized guidance

Personalized guidance, supported by well-trained career coaches (such as career navigators, guidance counselors, counselors, instructors, mentors), can be crucial for helping young people gain clarity on their education and career goals, acquire critical career navigation skills, and choose from the vast array of available postsecondary education and training programs. By giving young people access to career coaches across all systems—education institutions, workforce development entities, and community organizations—states can ensure that students get the guidance they need, no matter what system they are connected to. Tech-enabled tools, such as statewide career navigation platforms that provide information about localized and regional opportunities, can further help career coaches in providing customized information and supports based on a young person’s unique characteristics and the current stage of their learning and work journey.

To effectively support career counseling and advisement, states can play several critical roles. Some include establishing quality standards for career counseling and advisement at the secondary level. Additionally, states can provide targeted professional development for career counseling and advisement in high schools, prioritize federal career and technical education funds to expand access to career counseling and advisement, and set standards for career coaching at all levels and settings, including K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and community-based organizations. States can also develop and publicize statewide career navigation technology tools so they are readily available to young people and their families and utilized by stakeholders across each of these systems.

How the interplay across the four components supports an ideal career navigation policy infrastructure



When a state adopts policies addressing these four key components (indicated by * above), young people will benefit from improved career navigation services through better-aligned systems, adapted to the local context, that scale investment and best practices, and catalyze innovation and accountability.



Work-based learning

Work-based learning opportunities are essential for bridging the gap between education and employment by providing young people in secondary and postsecondary settings with hands-on experience and practical skills that are directly applicable in the workforce. These opportunities, such as apprenticeships, internships, and pre-apprenticeship programs, allow individuals to explore career pathways, connect the skills they acquire to real-world occupations, and build professional networks that can lead to good employment opportunities. By integrating work-based learning into education and training programs, states can ensure that learners are better prepared for the demands of the job market by acquiring technical and soft skills, increasing their social capital, and enhancing their long-term career prospects. This approach not only benefits individuals but also helps employers by creating a pipeline of skilled workers who are immediately ready to contribute.

To effectively support work-based learning for students, states can promote the quality of and access to these opportunities and establish a formal definition of work-based learning, clearly outlining for key stakeholders the activities and experiences that qualify for funding. In addition, states have the ability to set clear quality standards for work-based learning programs and provide financial incentives to employers engaged in them. Furthermore, states can provide dedicated funding streams for these programs, target available investments toward communities that face the most significant barriers to education and work, and ensure that there is statewide infrastructure in place to facilitate cross-sector partnerships that result in work-based learning opportunities and provide students and families with information about them.



Short-term credentials

Short-term, workforce-aligned credential programs play a vital role in rapidly equipping individuals with the skills needed to meet the demands of the job market. These programs, which can range from a few weeks to a year in length, are designed to provide targeted, industry-relevant training that leads to credentials valued by employers. By offering flexible and accessible pathways to workforce readiness outside of the traditional four-year-degree route, short-term credentials help individuals quickly gain the competencies required for in-demand careers and enhance their employability and economic mobility. Additionally, these programs often include stackable credentials, allowing learners to build on their skills and pursue further education and career advancement over time. This approach not only benefits workers but also supports employers by creating a pipeline of skilled talent ready to contribute to their organizations.

To effectively support short-term credential programs, states can articulate clear quality definitions and increase financing for these opportunities, especially since many of these programs fall outside of traditional postsecondary structures. States can establish a clear, refined, and explicit definition of quality or value for short-term credential programs, such as alignment with in-demand credentials of employers or industry groups and demonstrated gains in job placement and wage growth that include quality assurance mechanisms that are applicable to both students directly and the institutions that support them. States can also ensure that financial aid is available for short-term, in-demand programs beyond what is available through federal investments like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, making them free or low-cost for students in need. This financial support is crucial for increasing access to these programs, particularly among individuals with lower incomes, and helping them quickly gain the skills required for a rapidly changing job market. States can also include short-term credentials in their outcomes-based funding formula for postsecondary education. This inclusion ensures that funding is allocated based on the success and outcomes of these programs, promoting accountability and encouraging the development of high-quality short-term credential programs.



Policies for Each Component

Each of the 19 policies listed across our four components is critical to making career navigation work across education and workforce systems to help young people find, evaluate, access, and pay for high-quality education and training opportunities that lead to meaningful and rewarding careers. We examine state progress on adopting these policies and provide further detail in the following sections.

POLICIES



ACTIONABLE INFORMATION

State integrates information on learners' earnings and employment after high school completion, publishes information on these outcomes, and disaggregates this information by demographic variables.

State integrates information on learners' earnings and employment with, at minimum, its public four-year institutions, private four-year institutions, and community colleges; publishes information on these outcomes; and disaggregates this information by demographic variables.

State collects wage record data on all three enhanced unemployment compensation elements (occupation, earnings, and work location), or collects two of three with one being occupation.

State publishes an interactive resource containing education-to-opportunity statistics from at least three systems (public four-year, private four-year, community colleges, high school, WIOA-eligible training providers, etc.) to provide learners with comprehensive information to guide their college or career decisions.

State collects data on at least three types of nondegree and noncredit postsecondary education and training programs (such as college-issued nondegree certificates, apprenticeships, adult education, industry certifications, occupational licensures, etc.) and links employment-outcomes information to, at minimum, college-issued certificate information.



PERSONALIZED GUIDANCE

State has quality standards for career counseling and advisement at the secondary level.

State provides targeted professional development for career counseling and advisement at the secondary level.

State prioritizes federal Perkins V state leadership funds to improve career guidance programs.

POLICIES



WORK-BASED LEARNING

State has a formal definition of work-based learning, which clearly defines the set of activities and experiences that qualify as work-based learning for high school students (such as apprenticeships, internships, school-based enterprises, etc.).

State has a formal definition of youth apprenticeship, which clearly defines the set of activities and experiences that qualify as youth apprenticeship for young people ages 16-24.

State has set clear quality standards for work-based learning programs operated by schools and has mechanisms in place to hold all high school work-based learning programs accountable to these expectations (not just career and technical education programs funded through Perkins).

State provides financial incentives to employers engaged in work-based learning; this incentive applies to at least some types of employers or some types of work-based learning experiences, including apprenticeships.

State provides funding streams dedicated to work-based learning programs (including time-bound grant programs and budget line items).

State provides at least one kind of funding mechanism dedicated to apprenticeship programs, such as competitive grants, formula funds, or tax credits.

State has a statewide support infrastructure (an organization or system) that facilitates cross-sector partnerships that result in work-based learning opportunities for high school students, including apprenticeships.

State has statewide infrastructure in place to provide students and families with information about work-based learning opportunities.



SHORT-TERM CREDENTIALS

State has set a clear, refined, and explicit definition of quality or value for short-term credential programs and restricts the use of state funds only to programs adhering to this quality criteria.

State financial aid is available for short-term, in-demand programs so they are free or low-cost for students in need.

State includes short-term credentials in its outcomes-based funding formula for postsecondary education.

It is important to note that the 19 policies described above are not an exhaustive list of actions that state leaders can take in support of their career navigation systems. We curated this list from additional available data sources, which are detailed in the appendix. There are additional policies that we consider critical for state career navigation systems for which no high-quality, publicly available data exists for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Therefore, we were not able to include them in our analysis. They are the following:



Actionable information:

- State has a shared definition of in-demand jobs across education, workforce, and economic development agencies.
- State collects and reports on the quality of all postsecondary programs and learners' earnings and employment.



Personalized guidance

- State sets aligned standards for career coaching at all levels (K-12, postsecondary, workforce, community-based organizations, etc.).
- State provides targeted professional development for career counseling and advisement across all education and workforce development systems.
- State has a statewide career navigation technology tool that is made available to young people and their families and utilized across systems.
- State leverages a diverse set of federal funding (such as WIOA, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, and others) for career coaches and counselors across various systems, such as secondary, postsecondary, and workforce development.
- State incentivizes K-12, postsecondary education, workforce development, community-based organizations and other key partners to work together specifically to support the career preparation of young people.



Work-based learning

- *State provides financial incentives for students to participate in work-based learning.*
- *State allows work-based learning to count towards high school graduation requirements or to count for postsecondary credits.*
- *State incentivizes or supports postsecondary institutions (community colleges, four-year colleges or universities) in offering quality work-based learning experiences.*
- *State adopts policies that support youth apprenticeship.*



Short-term credentials

- *States capture data on short-term credential programs provided by employers and nonprofit providers.*
- *State supports the development of statewide cross-sector infrastructure for short-term credentials.*
- *State requires that state funded short-term credentials are stackable and aligned to longer-term pathways, such as degree attainment.*
- *State has a clear vision and strategy in support of their short-term credentials.*
- *State ties financial aid for short-term credentials to existing labor market demand.*

JFF may explore these policies in future publications. We list them here to promote further examination by others and encourage interest in their adoption at the state level, along with those that are included in the table above and analyzed below. Each component section below includes further discussion regarding the limitations of the data analyzed for this paper and additional areas where state action may be of interest.

Key Findings

Our review of 19 key state policies across the four key components finds that all 50 states and the District of Columbia have much progress to make in adopting essential and best-in-class policies that can support effective career navigation. While there are promising examples of state actions and bright spots across the four components, our findings show that, despite concerted efforts to support young people in achieving postsecondary and career success, states are missing out on the opportunity to build and support career navigation systems that are comprehensive and multifaceted.

1

Limited Adoption of Key Policies: *Few states have adopted a majority of the policies we believe contribute to a comprehensive and effective career navigation system.*

Only six states (Iowa, Maryland, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington) have adopted more than half of the recommended policies needed for an ideal career navigation system. Even among these states, substantial progress is needed to ensure their career navigation systems are fully accessible, high-quality, and integrated across key education and workforce settings. Meanwhile, according to our scan data, 31 states have implemented six or fewer, or less than one-third of all policies across all components. This suggests that states have a long way to go to put in place key policies that will support robust career navigation systems.

2

Incomplete Utilization of Policy Components: *States haven't fully leveraged the vast array of policies available to them within each of the four components to foster the development of a comprehensive and effective career navigation system.*

With the exception of two states, states have not adopted the full slate of recommended policies within any of the four components. Florida and North Carolina have both successfully adopted all the policies related to the short-term credentials component, but still have policy gaps in the other three. No state has successfully adopted all the policies related to the components of actionable information, personalized career guidance, and work-based learning. While JFF cannot report on the overall implementation of these policies through our methodology, this suggests that states are not considering all the types of policies that are available to them when reforming their education and workforce systems to better support the career navigation needs of young people. This has substantial effects on the availability and quality of career navigation services and supports, as it is the interconnectedness and alignment of all the policies that lead to comprehensive state career navigation systems.

3

Advancements in Funding and Incentives: States are making the most progress on increasing state funding and financial incentives for work-based learning opportunities and short-term credentials.

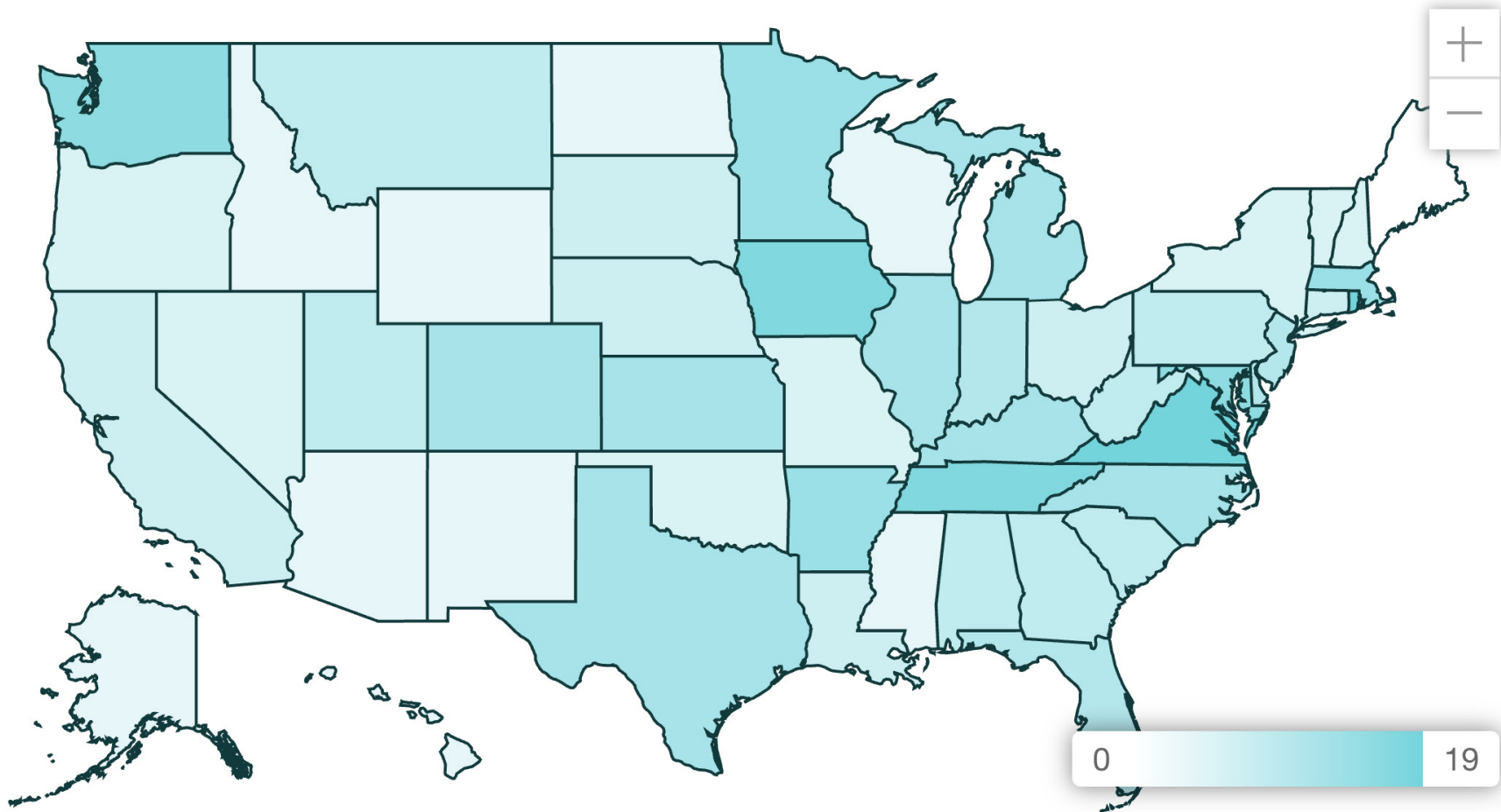
There continues to be strong bipartisan interest in supporting young people in achieving postsecondary and career success at the state level. States have generally made the most progress in increasing access to funding for various stakeholders that are critical for career navigation systems, such as K-12, career and technical, and postsecondary education and workforce systems. More than 40% of states have adopted policies that provide dedicated state funding for work-based learning and short-term credentials. Specifically, 24 states provide additional state funding (on top of federal funds that they may already be leveraging) for secondary work-based learning programs; 27 states provide financial incentives to employers that engage in work-based learning opportunities; 26 states provide funding dedicated to apprenticeship programs; and 24 states have increased the amount of financial aid available to young people for short-term, in-demand credential programs. Additionally, 21 states prioritize federal Perkins V state leadership funds to expand access to career counseling and advisement for young people.

4

Gaps in Policy Implementation: States have lagged in adopting policies that codify quality standards, incentivize cross-system partnerships, and ensure robust data analysis.

Few states are adopting policies that are critical for ensuring the quality and rigor of career navigation activities. For example, only six states have quality standards for career counseling and advising that young people receive under Perkins V career and technical education programs. Only six states have quality standards or frameworks for work-based learning experiences in high school, and only 11 have defined quality standards for short-term credentials. States also are lagging on incentivizing and supporting cross-system partnerships. Only seven states have established a statewide infrastructure (such as through an intermediary organization or otherwise) that supports work-based learning opportunities for high school students or provides students and their families with more information about these offerings in their area. States also are not integrating data across education and workforce systems, publicizing it, and disaggregating it so that state leaders and other key stakeholders can better understand what works for young people and young people themselves can act upon this information. When it comes to integrating, publicizing, and disaggregating data on learners' earnings and employment, only eight states do this with high school information and four states with postsecondary institution information.

This map illustrates state progress on all 4 key components for policy action in support of career navigation. States that are shaded with a darker color have adopted more of the 19 policies critical for advancing career navigation than the states that are shaded with a lighter color. You can review the individual component sections below for additional information about your state's progress.



Reflections

Our analysis shows that the least amount is known from a national perspective on how states are funding, or prioritizing funds, for personalized career guidance. This area is ripe for further analysis on the extent to which states are leveraging a diverse set of federal and state funding streams for career counseling and coaching, and for what types of approaches. Much more is known about states' policy progress increasing the availability and supports that impact other areas, like actionable data, work-based learning, and short-term credentials, but more work remains to ensure accessibility and quality in these spaces, enabling education and employer partnerships, aligning systems, and ensuring accountability.

Additionally, despite the lack of comprehensive state action across these four components, there are promising examples that states can emulate, including both low-hanging fruit to pursue and opportunities to dig deeper on policies that are proving more difficult to adopt and implement. State leaders are increasingly looking for ways to better provide young people ages 16-24 with career awareness and preparation opportunities and take advantage of federal opportunities to expand their reach. While this interest is promising and exciting, states will need to pay closer attention to policies that improve the quality of career navigation services and supports.

It is not enough for states to fund career navigation services and supports; they also need to think about and adopt policies that enable, align, and ensure the quality of these efforts. If a state provides professional development training for guidance counselors but does not develop quality standards for career counseling and advising, will this training effort help counselors and advisors work with young people in culturally competent ways that are proven to work? If a state provides additional funding for work-based learning experiences for students but does not develop statewide infrastructure for cross-sector partnerships, employers and educational institutions may not be able to provide enough access to high-quality work-based learning opportunities despite this funding. It is vital for states to think comprehensively within each component, in addition to the interplay of policies across all components.

While this document does not provide policy recommendations for state leaders or other actors, JFF plans to publish a policy agenda later this year that outlines key actions these stakeholders can take to develop an ideal career navigation system that ensures learners can find, evaluate, access, and pay for high-quality education and training programs that help them realize their goals.

The following four sections provide a deeper dive into each of the four components, highlighting the need, why each policy action matters for career navigation, states' progress implementing each action, and areas for further exploration.

How State Policy Can Transform Career Navigation for Young People

One of four key components for policy action in career navigation

ACTIONABLE
INFORMATION



PERSONALIZED
GUIDANCE



WORK-BASED
LEARNING



SHORT-TERM
CREDENTIALS



Actionable Information



Students face significant and costly decisions when choosing their postsecondary and career paths, including where to go, what to study, how much to pay, and which career to pursue. Unfortunately, they often lack access to crucial and digestible information about the availability of different career options, how specific postsecondary and workforce training programs prepare students for these careers, and whether these programs are a good return on investment. Although this information exists in many places and formats, it remains inaccessible to those who need it most—students, families, educators, counselors, program staff, and policymakers—and of varying quality. State data systems fail to connect across education and workforce systems to answer essential questions about student and program performance and labor market needs. These systems also struggle to disaggregate information so that stakeholders understand how these programs perform for different populations and contexts.

Providing easy-to-understand and actionable labor market information and outcome data for education and workforce programs ensures that young people and their families can navigate

high-stakes education and career choices with confidence. It also enables educators and counselors to guide students toward promising career paths that align with their interests and strengths, enhancing student success and supporting economic growth by creating a responsive workforce. Integrating this data across institutions and systems also can enable program providers, intermediaries, and policymakers to make more effective and economical decisions by having key data on student progression from high school to postsecondary and workforce opportunities, regional labor market needs across industries, and the efficacy of education and skills-development programs compared to their costs. By disaggregating this data, postsecondary institutions and workforce training providers would be able to structure their programs and supports more effectively and better counsel students on their career choices. Understanding local job market demands through increased data access, integration, and disaggregation allows institutions to tailor curricula to equip all students with sought-after skills and knowledge, ensuring graduates are well-prepared to meet community needs.

Why policy action matters

Getting actionable, statewide information on postsecondary and career opportunities is no small feat, particularly with a rapidly changing economy and an influx in new postsecondary options. Education and workforce development systems need the proper direction, incentives, and resources to improve their data collection efforts, connect data systems across sectors, and report on the earnings and employment outcomes of various programs to ensure continuous improvement and guarantee that young people and their families have the best information to make informed decisions. Policy also can incentivize employers to be key players in supporting good and timely labor market trends. Overall, state support is needed to make complex data and information digestible for all individuals.

RECOMMENDED POLICY NUMBER OF STATES WITH POLICY ADOPTED (AS OF 2024)

State integrates information on learners' earnings and employment after high school completion, publishes information on these outcomes, and disaggregates this information by demographic variables.

8 out of 51 States

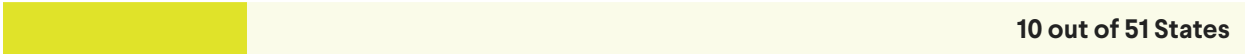
This matters for career navigation because more and more high school students are receiving early postsecondary opportunities (such as dual enrollment) and career-readiness opportunities (such as work-based learning or earning industry recognized certificates), earning both high school diplomas and postsecondary credentials by the time they graduate high school. As a result, it's important to understand the earnings and employment outcomes of students that receive these experiences and go directly from high school to employment.

State integrates information on learners' earnings and employment with postsecondary opportunities (at minimum, its public four-year institutions, private four-year institutions, and community colleges). State publishes this information on these outcomes using interactive tools and disaggregate the information by demographic variables.

4 out of 51 States

This matters for career navigation because integrating education-to-employment data is crucial for understanding how well education and training programs prepare students for careers. Publishing—in an interactive and digestible manner—how well participants fare from public four-year institutions, private four-year institutions, community college, and WIOA Eligible Training Program to employment can help young people make the best choices for them on what to pursue after high school and equip counselors with information on how to guide them.

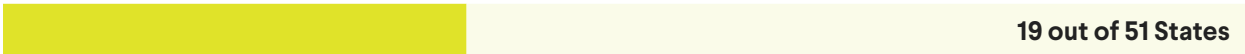
State collects **enhanced wage records** from employers, enabling the state to more deeply understand labor market trends and convey these insights to the public. Specifically, the state collects wage record data on all three enhanced unemployment compensation elements (occupation, earnings, and work location), or collects two of the three, with one being occupation.



10 out of 51 States

This matters for career navigation because requiring employers to provide more detailed information about the occupations and job titles of their employees, hours worked, pay rate, and their work location—and publishing that information—enables states to generate important insights relating to labor market supply and demand, trends in new and emerging jobs, the return on investment of education and training, and regional cost of living indices. Employers' insights on occupations are critical for ensuring young people receive the best and most timely and up-to-date information regarding labor market trends within their states and communities.

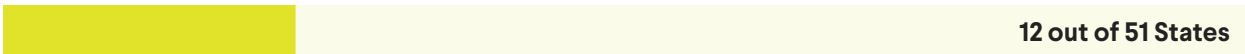
State publishes an **interactive resource containing education-to-opportunity statistics** from at least three systems (public four-year, private four-year, community colleges, high school, WIOA-eligible training providers, etc.) to provide learners with comprehensive information to guide their college or career decisions.



19 out of 51 States

This matters for career navigation because students, families, counselors, and others need publicly available and easy-to-utilize tools that effectively communicate complex education-to-employment outcomes in a way that will help guide young people in making the best decisions for their futures.

State **collects data on at least three types of nondegree and noncredit postsecondary education and training programs** (such as college-issued nondegree certificates, apprenticeships, adult education, industry certifications, occupational licensures, etc.) and links employment-outcomes information to, at minimum, college-issued certificate information.



12 out of 51 States

This matters for career navigation because nondegree and noncredit programs are rapidly growing, and all learners and workers need information about what these programs lead to. Additionally, program leaders and policymakers need this information to understand how these programs are faring for individuals, employers, and the economy so that they can adjust and improve if needed.

Key Findings

Our review of existing state scans demonstrates bright spots and areas of improvement for state policies related to actionable information, including the following:



Overall: On average, states have adopted approximately 20% (or 1 of 5) policies in this component.



Signs of progress: 19 states have created interactive resources containing education-to-opportunity statistics for three or more systems (such as public and private four-year institutions, community colleges, high schools, and WIOA-eligible training providers, etc.) to help guide learners' college or career decisions.



Critical gaps: Only four states are integrating information on learners' earnings and employment with, at minimum, their public four-year institutions, private four-year institutions, and community colleges, and publishing the information on these outcomes and disaggregating the data.



Ahead of the curve: Kentucky has adopted four out of five policies that provide students and their families with actionable information on education and workforce pathways. Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Virginia have all adopted three out of five policies.

Other recommended policies not tracked in available 50-state and DC scans

There are additional policies that would improve young people's access and ability to utilize actionable information on education and career opportunities. To date, little is known from a national perspective on states' progress in the following areas:

- State has a shared definition of in-demand jobs across education, workforce, and economic development agencies, ensuring that each sector is helping young people move toward the same goal and tracking critical information to assess their progress.
- State collects and reports on the quality of all postsecondary programs and learners' earnings and employment. With a variety of postsecondary programs available to young people, states will need to take additional action to understand how each of these programs improves the economic success of their participants.

Additional information on how states are incorporating these policies would provide a more holistic view of whether their career navigation systems effectively support actionable information for young people.

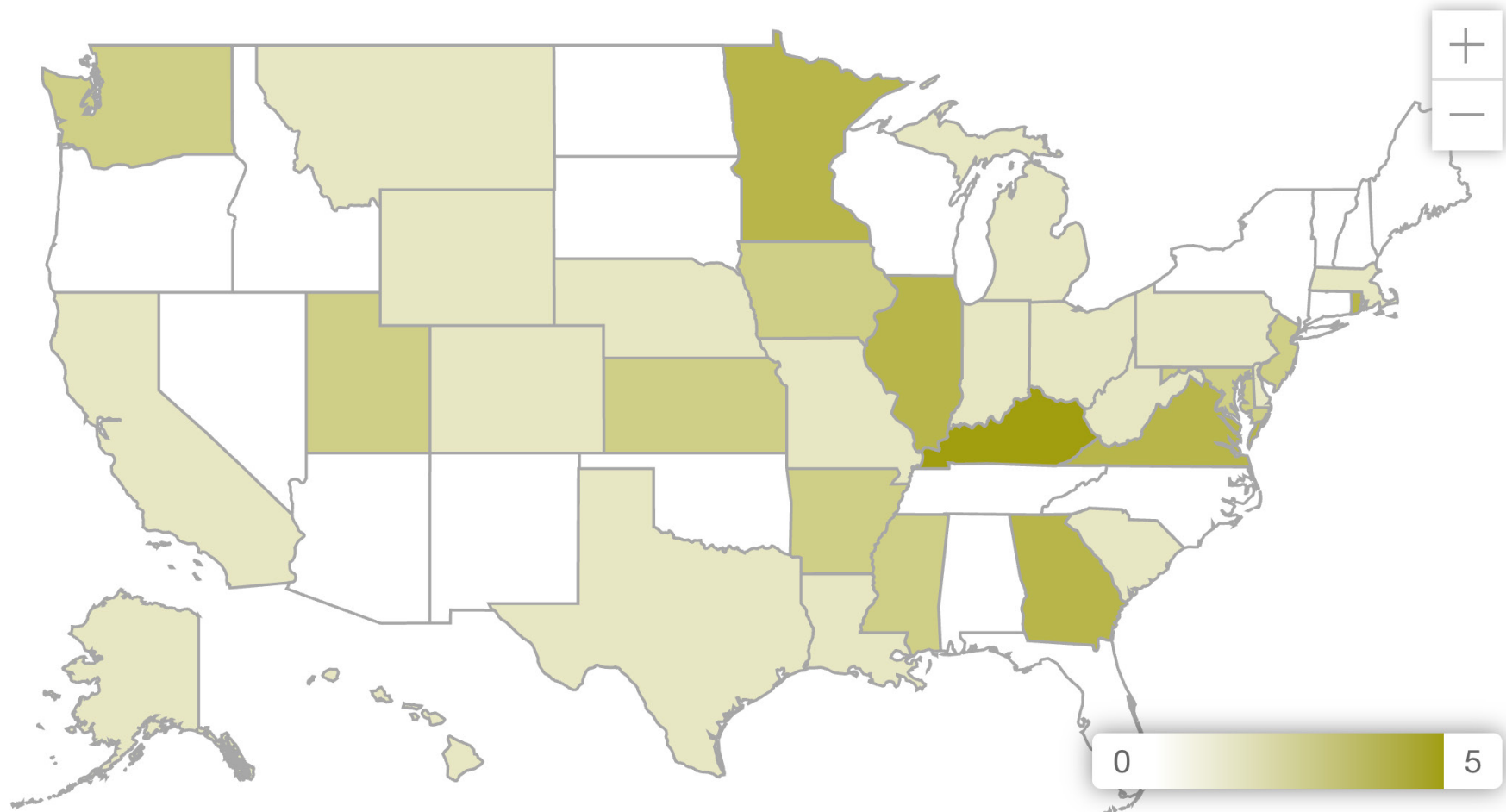
State Spotlight: Kentucky

Supported by statewide policy, Kentucky leaders have developed a robust cradle-to-career data infrastructure that is utilized by key stakeholders across their state and maintained by the Kentucky Center for Statistics (KY Stats).²³ KY Stats connects, links, and reports on education and workforce data across Kentucky. Its longitudinal data system includes nearly 6,000 data elements across 26 agencies, and key partners include the Kentucky Department of Education, the Council on Postsecondary Education, the Higher Education Assistance Authority, the Education Professionals Standards Board, and the Kentucky Unemployment Insurance System.

As a nonpartisan voice using data and research to inform various education and workforce reforms, KY Stats supports policymakers and practitioners in making better decisions. For example, KY Stats provides the data to help inform the strategies of Kentucky's Commonwealth Education Continuum, which is the state's P-20 initiative focused on strengthening Kentucky's education pipeline and ensuring students have access to postsecondary degrees and credentials that lead to good jobs. KY Stats' Life Outcomes Report looks at the employment outcomes of Kentucky's high school graduates and their educational attainment and employment outcomes over time. This report has played a key role in informing initiatives' strategies.²⁴

Additionally, KY Stats also supports the work of guidance counselors who help inform students of the most in-demand jobs in the region, the money students can expect to make from these jobs, and what education and training will be required to access them. This includes providing enhanced wage records on occupations and pay rates for workers in different industries. The state also has built a Career Explorer tool that allows students and their families to find prospective career information based on student skills and abilities, desired income, college major, or other certifications, and desired occupation. Additionally, KY Stats convenes a data equity advisory committee to inform its efforts to expand data access across the state's birth-to-workforce continuum for all Kentuckians.

This map illustrates state progress on this key component for policy action in support of career navigation. States that are shaded with a darker color have adopted more policies related to this component than states that are shaded with a lighter color. You can review the following table to see which policies your state has adopted.



ACTIONABLE INFORMATION

	Integrates information on learners' earnings and employment after high school completion	Integrates information on learners' earnings and employment with postsecondary opportunities	Enhanced wage records	Interactive resources containing education-to-opportunity statistics	Collects data on nondegree and noncredit postsecondary education and training programs	Total
Alabama	●	●	●	●	●	0
Alaska	●	●	●	●	●	1
Arizona	●	●	●	●	●	0
Arkansas	●	●	●	●	●	2
California	●	●	●	●	●	1
Colorado	●	●	●	●	●	1
Connecticut	●	●	●	●	●	0
Delaware	●	●	●	●	●	1
District of Columbia	●	●	●	●	●	0
Florida	●	●	●	●	●	0
Georgia	●	●	●	●	●	3
Hawaii	●	●	●	●	●	1
Idaho	●	●	●	●	●	0
Illinois	●	●	●	●	●	3
Indiana	●	●	●	●	●	1
Iowa	●	●	●	●	●	2
Kansas	●	●	●	●	●	2
Kentucky	●	●	●	●	●	4
Louisiana	●	●	●	●	●	1
Maine	●	●	●	●	●	0
Maryland	●	●	●	●	●	2
Massachusetts	●	●	●	●	●	1
Michigan	●	●	●	●	●	1
Minnesota	●	●	●	●	●	3
Mississippi	●	●	●	●	●	2
Missouri	●	●	●	●	●	1
Montana	●	●	●	●	●	1
Nebraska	●	●	●	●	●	1

● Yes ● No

ACTIONABLE INFORMATION

	Integrates information on learners' earnings and employment after high school completion	Integrates information on learners' earnings and employment with postsecondary opportunities	Enhanced wage records	Interactive resources containing education-to-opportunity statistics	Collects data on nondegree and noncredit postsecondary education and training programs	Total
Nevada	●	●	●	●	●	0
New Hampshire	●	●	●	●	●	0
New Jersey	●	●	●	●	●	2
New Mexico	●	●	●	●	●	0
New York	●	●	●	●	●	0
North Carolina	●	●	●	●	●	0
North Dakota	●	●	●	●	●	0
Ohio	●	●	●	●	●	1
Oklahoma	●	●	●	●	●	0
Oregon	●	●	●	●	●	0
Pennsylvania	●	●	●	●	●	1
Rhode Island	●	●	●	●	●	3
South Carolina	●	●	●	●	●	1
South Dakota	●	●	●	●	●	0
Tennessee	●	●	●	●	●	0
Texas	●	●	●	●	●	1
Utah	●	●	●	●	●	2
Vermont	●	●	●	●	●	0
Virginia	●	●	●	●	●	3
Washington	●	●	●	●	●	2
West Virginia	●	●	●	●	●	1
Wisconsin	●	●	●	●	●	0
Wyoming	●	●	●	●	●	1
Total	8	4	10	19	12	

● Yes ● No

How State Policy Can Transform Career Navigation for Young People

One of four key components for policy action in career navigation

ACTIONABLE
INFORMATION



PERSONALIZED
GUIDANCE



WORK-BASED
LEARNING



SHORT-TERM
CREDENTIALS



Personalized Guidance



Too many young people are leaving high school without clarity on where they're going next or how to get there. They face a vast array of degree and nondegree options, but little information on which paths lead to meaningful, quality jobs and careers. Today's young people are likely to have not just multiple jobs, but multiple careers. In this new context, traditional approaches to career counseling are insufficient. Fewer than a quarter of college students access campus career services, while the ratio of students to K-12 counselors and advisors is much too high in most states. Providing access to pathways will do little to improve student outcomes if young people do not have access to the information needed to make sound choices about their education and career options. Young people need continuous and ongoing personalized one-on-one support from a trusted adult to help guide them in their decisions and in navigating their postsecondary and career journeys.

Personalized guidance, supported by well-trained career coaches (such as career navigators, guidance counselors, counselors, instructors, and mentors) can be crucial for helping young people gain clarity on their education and career goals, acquire critical career navigation skills, and choose from the vast array of available postsecondary education and training programs. By providing young people with access to personalized guidance via career coaching across all systems—education institutions, workforce development entities, and community organizations—we can ensure that they get the practical information they need no matter what system they are connected to. Since human resources can only go so far, young people also need tech-enabled career navigation tools, such as statewide career navigation platforms, that provide customized information and services based on their unique characteristics, individual interests, and personal stage of their learning and work journey.

Why policy action matters

Despite recent progress connecting education to the world of work, today's education systems by in large continue to promote matriculation into traditional four-year degree programs and degree attainment as the end goals for students even if they may express interest in other options and education and career goals. As a result, policy action is needed to encourage these systems to focus on students' career goals and outcomes and promote a variety of options that are of interest to these students and can likewise ensure their long-term economic success. These systems should focus on ensuring young people obtain the proper information and personalized guidance about their various postsecondary and career options so that they are empowered to pursue those that are aligned with their longer-term priorities. All the individuals (such as counselors and advisors) that are serving today's young people need to be well equipped to serve them with practical career guidance and information. However, this guidance will only be truly impactful if states work to ensure it is personalized, high-quality, supported by data and technology, and delivered in a culturally competent manner.

RECOMMENDED POLICY NUMBER OF STATES WITH POLICY ADOPTED (AS OF 2022)

State has **quality standards for career counseling and advisement at the secondary level.**



This matters for career navigation because it can help support practitioners in the development and improvement of their career counseling and advising efforts by providing state definitions of key activities and require the adoption of evidence-based strategies. State-level quality standards can also ensure that students across the state are receiving the same forms of support.

State provides **targeted professional development for career counseling and advisement at the secondary level.**



This matters for career navigation because it can ensure counselors and advisors have the necessary skillset to provide career connected and individualized guidance to young people in an evidence-informed manner.

State **prioritizes federal Perkins V state leadership funds to improve career guidance programs.**



This matters for career navigation because Perkins V's state leadership funds are meant to develop and improve statewide efforts related to career and technical education. States that choose to prioritize these funds to improve and expand career guidance efforts can ensure that all young people in their state receive access to information that will help them make informed academic, career and technical education, and postsecondary decisions.

Key Findings

Our review of existing state scans demonstrates bright spots and areas of improvement for state policies related to personalized guidance, including the following:



On average, states have adopted just 28% (or nearly one out of three) of the policies in this category.



Critical gaps: Only six states have developed quality standards for career counseling and advisement for high-school students.



Signs of progress: 21 states are prioritizing their federal Perkins V career and technical education state leadership funds to expand access to career counseling and advisement programs.



Ahead of the curve: 14 states have successfully adopted two of the three policies, with all of these states prioritizing federal career and technical education funds to expand access to career counseling and advisement.

Other recommended policy actions not tracked in available 50-state and DC scans

There are additional policies that would improve young people's access and experience with personalized career counseling. To date, little is known from a national perspective on states' progress on the following areas:

- State sets aligned standards for career coaching at all levels (K-12, postsecondary, workforce, community-based organizations, etc.) and provides targeted professional development for career counseling and advisement across all education and workforce development systems. This information would be helpful in determining whether young people are experiencing similar career supports across the various systems they encounter.
- State has a statewide career navigation technology tool that is made available to young people and their families and utilized by stakeholders across systems.
- State leverages a diverse set of federal funding (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program) for career coaches and counselors across various systems, such as secondary, postsecondary, and workforce development.
- State incentivizes K-12, postsecondary education, workforce development, community-based organizations, and other key partners to work together specifically to support the career preparation of young people.

Additional information on how states are incorporating these policies would provide a more holistic view on whether their career navigation systems effectively support personalized guidance for young people.

State Spotlight: Arizona

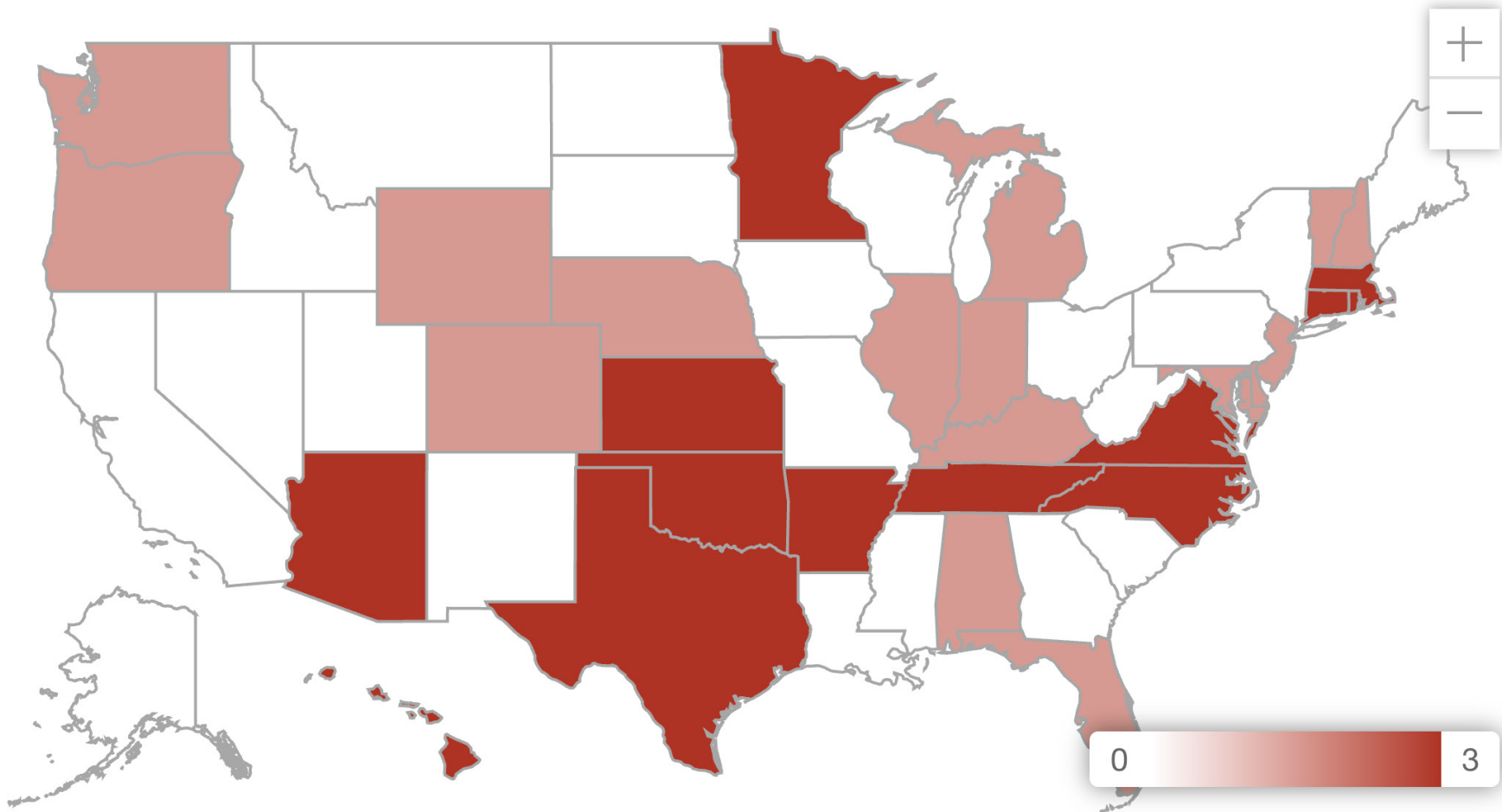
Arizona's Co-Advising Framework aims to facilitate collaboration between secondary and postsecondary educators, advisors, and staff to deliver aligned counseling and advising experiences to students and create a seamless career navigation system across secondary and postsecondary education. The framework focuses on creating pathways in computer science and cybersecurity to support students in transitioning from high school to college and career opportunities. It outlines activities that are organized under five key responsibilities of coadvisors:

- 1. Developing individual advising plans that span secondary and postsecondary education.*
- 2. Offering postsecondary exploration and navigation opportunities.*
- 3. Supporting career exploration through labor market awareness.*
- 4. Embedding rigorous academics throughout.*
- 5. Developing work-based learning preparation and opportunities.*

The goal is to increase enrollment of high-need students in these pathways and support them in achieving their college and career goals. By collaborating and co-advising students, the boundaries between high school and college become less rigid, making it easier for high-need students to access, enroll in, and complete these pathways and earn postsecondary credentials.

Early outcomes show that there has been increased communication and collaboration across high schools and the community college system. Additionally, 97% of educators report overall satisfaction with the advising approach and 92% of students report their overall satisfaction with the college and career activities.

This map illustrates state progress on this key component for policy action in support of career navigation. States that are shaded with a darker color have adopted more policies related to this component than states that are shaded with a lighter color. You can review the following table to see which policies your state has adopted.



	Quality standards for career counseling and advisement	Targeted professional development for career counseling and advisement	Prioritizes federal Perkins V state leadership funds	Total
Alabama	●	●	●	1
Alaska	●	●	●	0
Arizona	●	●	●	2
Arkansas	●	●	●	2
California	●	●	●	0
Colorado	●	●	●	1
Connecticut	●	●	●	2
Delaware	●	●	●	1
District of Columbia	●	●	●	2
Florida	●	●	●	1
Georgia	●	●	●	0
Hawaii	●	●	●	2
Idaho	●	●	●	0
Illinois	●	●	●	1
Indiana	●	●	●	1
Iowa	●	●	●	0
Kansas	●	●	●	2
Kentucky	●	●	●	1
Louisiana	●	●	●	0
Maine	●	●	●	0
Maryland	●	●	●	1
Massachusetts	●	●	●	2
Michigan	●	●	●	1
Minnesota	●	●	●	2
Mississippi	●	●	●	0
Missouri	●	●	●	0
Montana	●	●	●	0
Nebraska	●	●	●	1

● Yes ● No

	Quality standards for career counseling and advisement	Targeted professional development for career counseling and advisement	Prioritizes federal Perkins V state leadership funds	Total
Nevada	●	●	●	0
New Hampshire	●	●	●	1
New Jersey	●	●	●	1
New Mexico	●	●	●	0
New York	●	●	●	0
North Carolina	●	●	●	2
North Dakota	●	●	●	0
Ohio	●	●	●	0
Oklahoma	●	●	●	2
Oregon	●	●	●	1
Pennsylvania	●	●	●	0
Rhode Island	●	●	●	2
South Carolina	●	●	●	0
South Dakota	●	●	●	0
Tennessee	●	●	●	2
Texas	●	●	●	2
Utah	●	●	●	0
Vermont	●	●	●	1
Virginia	●	●	●	2
Washington	●	●	●	1
West Virginia	●	●	●	0
Wisconsin	●	●	●	0
Wyoming	●	●	●	1
Total	6	17	21	

● Yes ● No

How State Policy Can Transform Career Navigation for Young People

One of four key components for policy action in career navigation

ACTIONABLE
INFORMATION



PERSONALIZED
GUIDANCE



WORK-BASED
LEARNING



SHORT-TERM
CREDENTIALS



Work-Based Learning



Today's K-12 and postsecondary education systems by and large remain siloed and disconnected from the world of work. According to recent polling of Gen Z students who are in K-12 settings, 25% to 54% lack engaging school experiences.²⁵ This is particularly the case among students who aren't planning to pursue a degree after high school who also are notably less likely than college-bound students to feel motivated by and interested in what they are learning in school.²⁶

Work-based learning opportunities are an essential tool for bridging the gap between education and what students want to pursue next by providing young people in secondary and postsecondary settings with hands-on work experience and practical skills that are directly applicable in the workforce. These opportunities, such as apprenticeships, internships, and pre-apprenticeship programs, allow individuals to explore career pathways, connect the skills they acquire to real-world occupations, and build professional networks that can lead to direct employment opportunities. The interactions students receive with industry professionals via work-based learning experiences also can be a useful source of information for students about careers and related educational pathways, enabling them to effectively navigate their career

journeys and determine what it is they like and don't like.

By integrating work-based learning opportunities into education and training programs, states can ensure that learners are better prepared for the demands of the job market, increase their social capital, and enhance their long-term career prospects. This approach not only benefits individuals but also helps employers by creating a pipeline of skilled workers who are immediately ready to contribute.

Why policy action matters

Unfortunately, work-based learning experiences are not fully integrated throughout a student's high school and postsecondary experiences. As a result, policy action is needed to ensure that the [full continuum of work-based learning experiences](#) are available to all learners and that those experiences are high quality. Employer engagement is key to the success of high-quality work-based learning and therefore states can do much more to promote strong partnerships between K-12 systems, postsecondary, and employers and mitigate common concerns that employers' have regarding labor laws and liability issues. regarding labor laws and liability issues.

RECOMMENDED POLICY

NUMBER OF STATES WITH POLICY ADOPTED (AS OF 2022)

State has a formal definition of work-based learning, which clearly defines the set of activities and experiences that qualify as work-based learning for high school students (such as apprenticeships, internships, school-based enterprises, etc.).



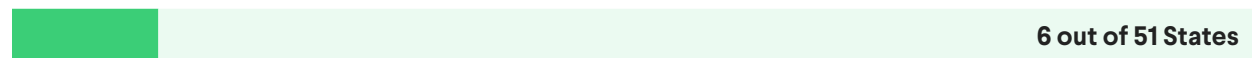
This matters for career navigation because it can help ensure that stakeholders are on the same page regarding the state's vision for work-based learning and how it fits into its broader college and career pathways efforts.

State has a formal definition of youth apprenticeship, which clearly defines the set of activities and experiences that qualify as youth apprenticeship for young people ages 16-24.



This matters for career navigation because for young people to navigate their career paths, they need access to meaningful work-based learning experiences with direct connections to employers through youth apprenticeships. (Includes data from 2024).

State has set clear quality standards for work-based learning programs operated by schools and has mechanisms in place to hold all high school work-based learning programs accountable to quality expectations (not just those CTE programs funded through Perkins).



This matters for career navigation because it can help ensure that all students within a state are receiving the same type of work-based learning experiences. This is particularly critical for rural areas that lack a vast array of employers or that may be dominated by just one or two industries. Given this, it is important that high-quality opportunities be provided to rural students via innovative and virtual ways.

State policy provides financial incentives to employers engaged in work-based learning; this incentive applies to at least some types of employers or some types of work-based learning experiences, including apprenticeships.



This matters for career navigation because high-quality work-based learning experiences require employer participation in various ways, such as supporting career fairs, industry projects, job shadows, mentoring, internships, pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships, and other forms of on-the-job training. Additionally, many employers hold common concern about offering work-based learning experiences due to labor laws and liability issues. These concerns are generally unfounded, but misperceptions remain. State financial incentives for employers engaged in work-based learning can signal to employers that they can in fact partner with education institutions to offer work-based learning.

State provides **funding streams dedicated to work-based learning programs (including time-bound grant programs and budget line items).**



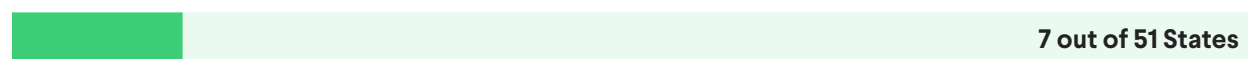
This matters for career navigation because in many schools and districts, work-based learning opportunities are viewed as an add-on for students that isn't essential. This can lead to competition for both resources and attention with other programming. Dedicated funding for work-based learning can signal to schools that these opportunities should be priority programming for students, which in turn can help students "test" different career options and navigate their choices.

State provides at least one kind of **funding mechanism dedicated to apprenticeship programs, such as competitive grants, formula funds, or tax credits.**



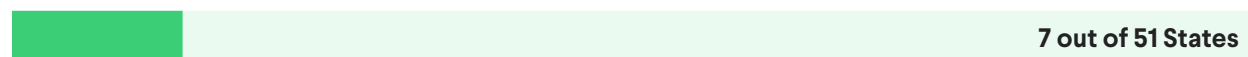
This matters for career navigation because, similarly, there are limited resources that programs can leverage for apprenticeships programs. Dedicated state funding mechanisms for apprenticeship programs would help ensure the expansion of apprenticeship across the state, thus providing young people with another high-quality postsecondary option to choose from after high school. (Includes data from 2024).

State has a **statewide support infrastructure (an organization or system) that facilitates cross-sector partnerships that result in work-based learning opportunities for high school students, including apprenticeships.**



This matters for career navigation because, like high-quality work-based learning, effective career navigation needs impactful collaboration between the education-to-workforce continuum, state agencies, and community partners. Intermediary organizations facilitate cross-sector partnerships and pull together resources and learners around a shared vision. They act as the bridge between stakeholders and program participants who may not have been connected otherwise. They also can source support and resources to develop and test new programs. As a result, they need resources and supports to do their job well, which can be provided at the state level.

State has **statewide infrastructure in place to provide students and families information about work-based learning opportunities.**



This matters for career navigation because work-based learning can help young people get hands-on work experience and learn about various industries to determine what path to pursue. Until work-based learning is fully integrated throughout all students' high school pathways, more information needs to be provided to and shared with students and families so that students can experience these opportunities as they are available.

Key Findings

Our review of existing state scans demonstrates bright spots and areas of improvement for state policies related to actionable information, including the following:



On average, states have adopted 42% (or approximately three of seven) of the policies actions within this component.



Ahead of the curve: Iowa and Tennessee have adopted seven of the eight policies related to work-based learning while four states (Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Washington) have adopted six policies. These actions ensure that states are providing high-quality work-based learning experiences that are accessible to all students and connected with future education and workforce opportunities.



Signs of progress: 45 states have a formal definition of work-based learning, and 31 states have a formal definition of youth apprenticeship, signaling states' desire to establish clear priorities and structures for these areas.



Critical gaps: Only six states have established clear quality standards for work-based learning programs, and only seven states have set up and supported a statewide infrastructure to enable the cross-sector collaboration that's needed to build and sustain effective work-based learning programs.

Other recommended policy actions not tracked in available 50-state and DC scans

There are additional policies that would improve young people's access to and quality of work-based learning experiences. To date, little is known from a national perspective on states' progress on the following areas:

- State provides financial incentives for students to participate in work-based learning.
- State allows work-based learning to count towards high school graduation requirements or to count for postsecondary credits.
- State incentivizes or supports postsecondary institutions (community colleges, four-year universities) in offering quality work-based experiences.
- State adopts policies that support youth apprenticeship.

Additional information on how states are incorporating these policies would provide a more holistic view on whether their career navigation systems effectively support work-based learning for young people.

State Spotlight: Washington

Washington state is a national leader in advancing work-based learning, earning high marks—five out of seven—across JFF’s key policies for high-quality work-based learning systems. This leadership is driven by the state’s clear and comprehensive definition of work-based learning (WBL), strong accountability measures, sustained funding, and the groundbreaking Career Connect Washington initiative.²⁷ Together, these efforts create a robust, scalable model that prepares students for high-demand careers while ensuring alignment between education and industry needs.

Washington’s statewide definition of work-based learning emphasizes sustained interactions with industry or community professionals in workplace or simulated environments within educational institutions. These experiences provide students with in-depth, firsthand exposure to career-relevant tasks that are aligned with curriculum and instruction. The state’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction embeds work-based learning into its broader education and workforce strategy, focusing on improving academic achievement, expanding career-exploration opportunities, fostering employability skills, and increasing the likelihood of postsecondary education or training.

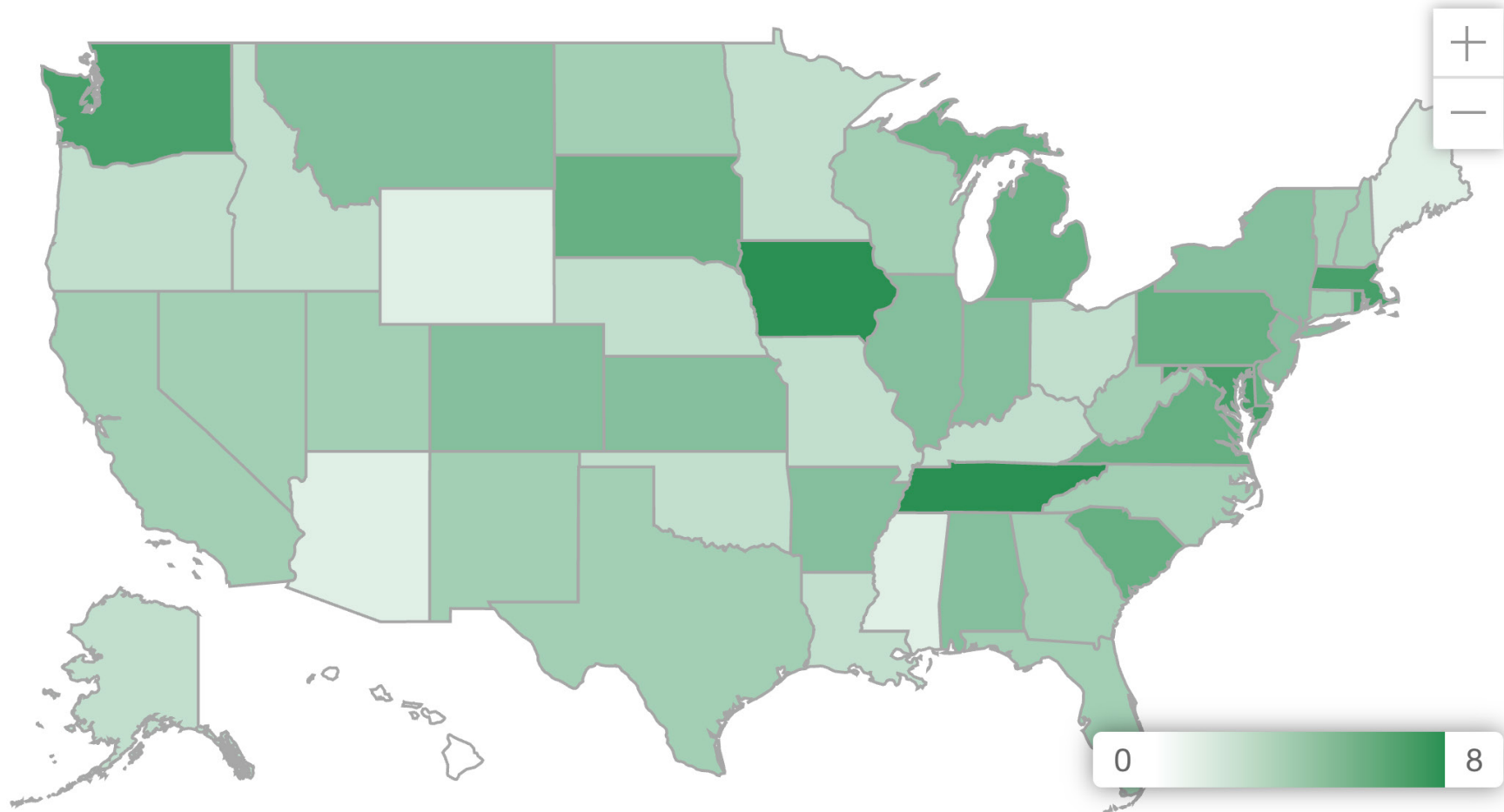
Washington allocates \$750,000 annually to support career and technical education (CTE) programs, ensuring that students can access high-quality work-based learning opportunities.²⁸ In addition, Worksite Learning programs that meet state CTE Program Standards receive enhanced funding, allowing students to earn credit while gaining hands-on workplace experience.²⁹ To maximize the impact of these investments, Washington has capped school districts’ indirect cost charges for state-funded CTE programs, ensuring that the majority of resources go directly toward student learning and employer partnerships.

Career Connect Washington (CCW), a statewide initiative launched in 2019, scales career-connected learning and creates clear pathways from education to employment. CCW operates across three key components: Career Explore, which provides early exposure to careers through such activities as industry tours and job shadows; Career Prep, which deepens learning through internships, pre-apprenticeships, and project-based experiences; and Career Launch, which offers paid, high-quality work experiences that include industry credentials or significant college credit. These efforts have had a transformative impact on workforce development across the state:

- The creation of more than 115 new Career Launch programs and 22 new Registered Apprenticeships in high-demand industries such as technology, construction, health care, and advanced manufacturing.
- More than 9,700 young people completed Career Launch programs. In the last academic year alone, CCW enrolled more than 19,000 students in these programs, marking a 58% increase over four years.
- The initiative has attracted more than \$30 million in federal funding to further expand career-connected learning opportunities statewide.³⁰

Washington has built one of the nation’s most effective WBL ecosystems, seamlessly integrating education and workforce development. By prioritizing clear definitions, dedicated funding, and large-scale partnerships through CCW, the state continues to set the standard for preparing students for the jobs of today and the future.

This map illustrates state progress on this key component for policy action in support of career navigation. States that are shaded with a darker color have adopted more policies related to this component than states that are shaded with a lighter color. You can review the following table to see which policies your state has adopted.



WORK-BASED LEARNING

	A formal definition of WBL	A formal definition of youth apprenticeship	Clear quality standards for WBL	Financial incentives to employers engaged in WBL	Funding streams dedicated to WBL	Funding mechanisms dedicated to apprenticeships	Statewide support infrastructure to facilitate cross-sector partnerships	Statewide infrastructure to provide students and families information about WBL	Total
Alabama	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
Alaska	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
Arizona	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1
Arkansas	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
California	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
Colorado	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
Connecticut	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
Delaware	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	5
District of Columbia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
Florida	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
Georgia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
Hawaii	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	0
Idaho	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
Illinois	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
Indiana	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
Iowa	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	7
Kansas	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
Kentucky	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
Louisiana	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
Maine	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1
Maryland	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	6
Massachusetts	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	6
Michigan	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	5
Minnesota	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
Mississippi	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1
Missouri	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
Montana	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
Nebraska	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2

● Yes ● No

WORK-BASED LEARNING

	A formal definition of WBL	A formal definition of youth apprenticeship	Clear quality standards for WBL	Financial incentives to employers engaged in WBL	Funding streams dedicated to WBL	Funding mechanisms dedicated to apprenticeships	Statewide support infrastructure to facilitate cross-sector partnerships	Statewide infrastructure to provide students and families information about WBL	Total
<i>Nevada</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>New Hampshire</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>New Jersey</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
<i>New Mexico</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>New York</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
<i>North Carolina</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>North Dakota</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>Ohio</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
<i>Oklahoma</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
<i>Oregon</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
<i>Pennsylvania</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	5
<i>Rhode Island</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	6
<i>South Carolina</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	5
<i>South Dakota</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	5
<i>Tennessee</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	7
<i>Texas</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>Utah</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>Vermont</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>Virginia</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	5
<i>Washington</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	6
<i>West Virginia</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>Wisconsin</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<i>Wyoming</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1
Total	45	31	6	27	24	26	7	7	

● Yes ● No

How State Policy Can Transform Career Navigation for Young People

One of four key components for policy action in career navigation

ACTIONABLE
INFORMATION



PERSONALIZED
GUIDANCE



WORK-BASED
LEARNING



SHORT-TERM
CREDENTIALS



Short-Term Credentials



Today's students are more likely to be balancing education and work, while also juggling family responsibilities. Due in part to these shifts, students are looking for accelerated postsecondary opportunities that will quickly get them the education and training they need to land a good job and economically advance from their current situation.³¹ Younger generations, in particular, show more interest in short-term credentials as an option after high school. A Morning Consult survey commissioned by JFF and ASA found that a majority (58%) of Gen Z youth agreed that companies should hire more high school graduates who have pursued nondegree education pathways.³² Of young people who participate in nondegree pathways like short-term credential programs, 71% feel prepared for the workforce, and 90% are satisfied with their choice to pursue this pathway.³³ Despite their increasing interest in short-term credentials and positive feedback from those already pursuing these options, too many young people lack practical information about them and what they lead to, and are unable to pursue these programs due to their financial constraints.³⁴

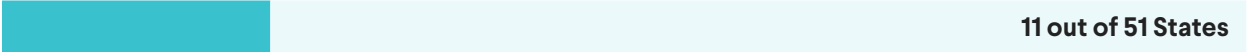
With more than 1 million unique credentials, it is difficult to navigate the education and training marketplace.³⁵ For purposes of this scan, short-term credentials refer to nondegree postsecondary options that end in a credential such as a certificate, industry-recognized certification, and license or digital badge, and demonstrates the credential holder has acquired the necessary skills for in-demand employment. Short-term credentials can be operated by postsecondary institutions, industry organizations, community-based organizations, and other public and private providers. Young people who participate in these programs often access immediate employment opportunities, acquire wage increases, and advance in their chosen career or through education pathways by “stacking” other related coursework.³⁶

Why policy action matters

Short-term credentials and programs have been gaining traction among students, their families, employers, secondary and postsecondary education institutions, and policy leaders. However, there remains much to learn about the outcomes of many of these programs and which factors are most critical for achieving positive, high-impact results. Policy action is needed to both expand the availability of affordable, flexible, and accelerated short-term credential programs and ensure that they align with labor market needs and support individuals in achieving economic success. Many postsecondary institutions are still geared towards providing four-year degree programs to students even as these students express their desire for more flexible opportunities. State policy can incentivize these institutions to offer a greater number of short-term credential programs that can better meet students where they are and reward these institutions for delivering high-quality programs that lead to greater job placements and wage increases for young people.

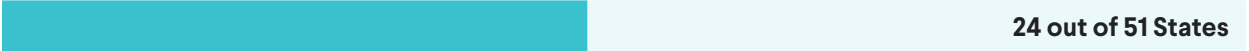
RECOMMENDED POLICY NUMBER OF STATES WITH POLICY ADOPTED (AS OF 2023-24)

State has set a clear, refined, and explicit **definition of quality or value for short-term credential programs** and restricts the use of state funds only to programs adhering to this quality criteria.



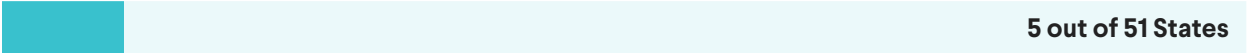
This matters for career navigation because in order for young people to navigate their career paths, they need access to meaningful postsecondary options including high-quality and meaningful short-term credentials. (Includes data from 2023.)

State financial aid is available for short-term, in-demand programs so they are free or low-cost for students in need.



This matters for career navigation because students won't be able to pursue their postsecondary option of choice if they are unable to afford it. State financial aid for short-term credentials can make these options more available to young people and serve as a lever for requiring programs to collect outcome information that can drive decision-making. (Includes data from 2024.)

State includes short-term credentials in its outcomes-based funding formula for postsecondary education.



This matters for career navigation because it can help ensure that postsecondary institutions offer more options for students to pursue and are incentivized to ensure their quality in terms of job placement, wage growth, and student satisfaction. (Includes data from 2024.)

Key Findings

Our review of existing state scans demonstrates bright spots and areas of improvement for state policies related to short-term credentials, including the following:



On average, states have adopted 26% (or nearly one of three) of the policies within this component.



Signs of progress: 24 states have taken action to ensure that state financial aid is available for short-term programs so that they are completely free or relatively low-cost options for students.



Critical gaps: Only five states have included short-term credentials in their outcome-based funding formulas for postsecondary education, signifying that institutional support for these opportunities is still limited.



Ahead of the curve: Florida and North Carolina have successfully adopted all three of the policies within this component, the only examples of this across all four components. In addition, nine states have successfully adopted two of the three policies that promote short-term credentials by improving the quality of these programs and their accessibility through direct financial aid and support for postsecondary institutions.

Other recommended policy actions not tracked in available 50-state and DC scans

There are additional policies that would improve young people's access and experience with short-term credentials. To date, little is known from a national perspective on states' progress on the following areas:

- States captures data on short-term credential programs provided by employers and nonprofit providers.
- State supports the development of statewide cross-sector infrastructure for short-term credentials.
- State requires that state-funded short-term credentials are stackable and aligned to longer-form pathways, such as degree attainment.
- State has a clear vision and strategy in support of their short-term credentials.
- States are tying financial aid for short-term credentials to existing labor market demand.

Additional information on how states are incorporating these policies would provide a more holistic view on whether their career navigation systems effectively support short-term credentials for young people.

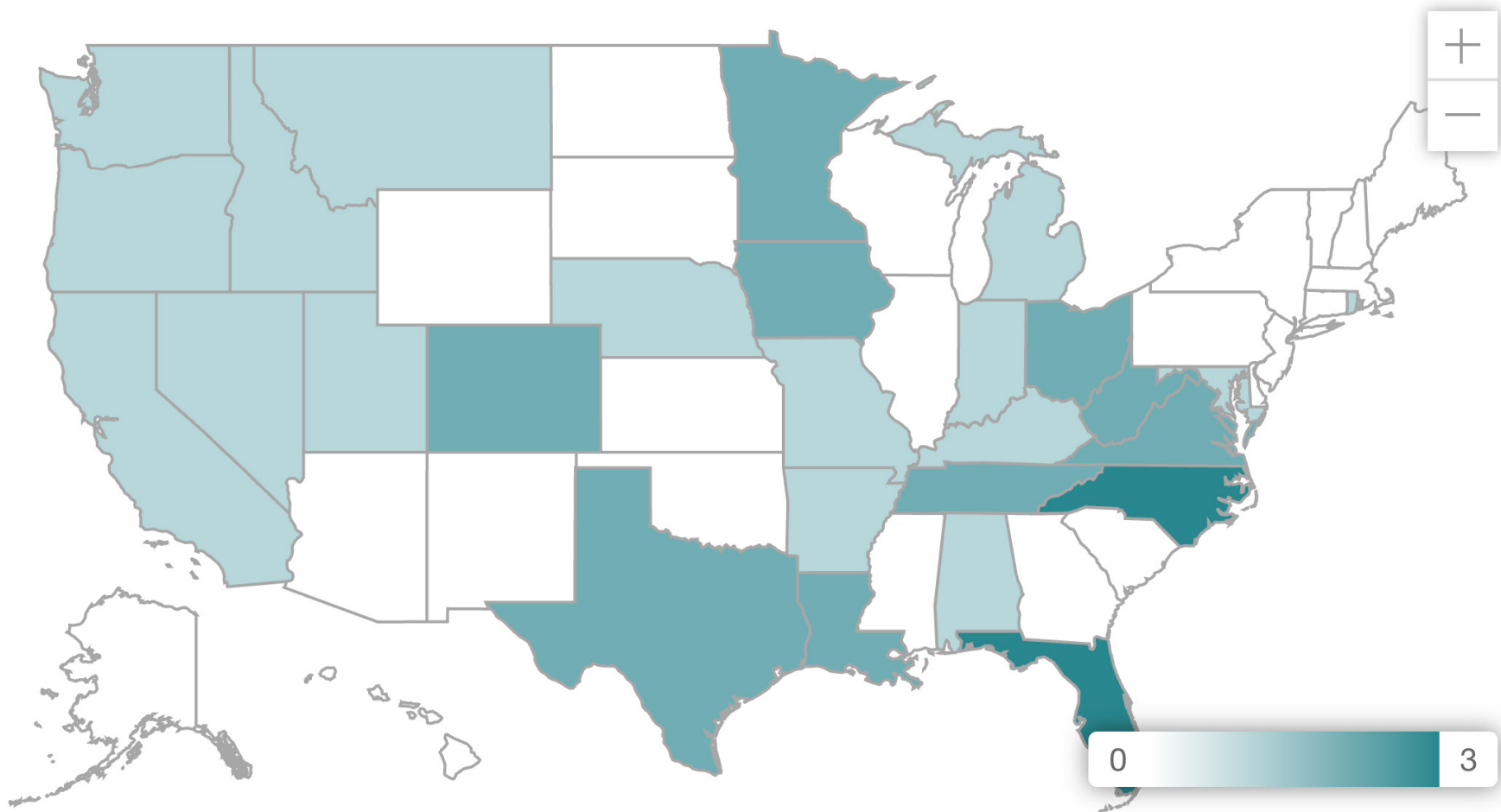
State Spotlight: Florida

Florida is one of two states to adopt all three key policies in support of short-term credentials. In 2021, Florida adopted Senate Bill 98 (SB 98) unanimously in both chambers to further align the state's workforce development system.³⁷ To increase the supply of workers in high-demand industries, expand the affordability of training, and increase interest in short-term credentials among Floridians, the bill established the Open Door Grant Program. This pay-for-performance program supports postsecondary institutions (prioritizing those that partner with local workforce development boards), with the state paying for two-thirds of the cost of short-term credential programs once a student completes the program and earns the credential. A quarter of annual funds must assist students in rural areas of the state, and the state's Department of Education must collect data about student completion each year.³⁸

Florida's SB 98 also revised the state's funding formula. The law tasks the state's Credentials Review Committee with developing a formula for school district performance funds that would take into account key outcomes such as student job placements and wages. One-third of these funds are awarded based on student job placements while the remaining two-thirds are awarded based on student wages that exceed the minimum wage, with additional weight given for underserved populations.³⁹ The Credentials Review Committee also is required to review not only short-term credentials but degree programs as well to make sure they are of high value. SB 98 also instructs the State Board of Education to review additional short-term credential programs to ensure they meet quality definitions that align with the work of the Credential Review Committee. Districts can then select programs for performance-based funding from this list, ensuring that their institutions invest in high-quality credential programs that meet this threshold.⁴⁰

These three components of Florida's policy ensure that stakeholders in the state have a clear sense of what high-quality short-term credentials are and understand that funding flows to credentials that meet these expectations. Florida's policies help to ensure that young people across the state can gain the skills and credentials needed for their entry into the workforce, enhancing their employability, earning potential and

This map illustrates state progress on this key component for policy action in support of career navigation. States that are shaded with a darker color have adopted more policies related to this component than states that are shaded with a lighter color. You can review the following table to see which policies your state has adopted.



SHORT-TERM CREDENTIALS

	Definition of quality or value for credential programs	State financial aid is available for short-term, in-demand programs	Includes short-term credentials in its outcomes-based funding formula	Total
Alabama	●	●	●	1
Alaska	●	●	●	0
Arizona	●	●	●	0
Arkansas	●	●	●	1
California	●	●	●	1
Colorado	●	●	●	2
Connecticut	●	●	●	0
Delaware	●	●	●	0
District of Columbia	●	●	●	0
Florida	●	●	●	3
Georgia	●	●	●	0
Hawaii	●	●	●	0
Idaho	●	●	●	1
Illinois	●	●	●	0
Indiana	●	●	●	1
Iowa	●	●	●	2
Kansas	●	●	●	0
Kentucky	●	●	●	1
Louisiana	●	●	●	2
Maine	●	●	●	0
Maryland	●	●	●	1
Massachusetts	●	●	●	0
Michigan	●	●	●	1
Minnesota	●	●	●	2
Mississippi	●	●	●	0
Missouri	●	●	●	1
Montana	●	●	●	1
Nebraska	●	●	●	1

● Yes ● No

SHORT-TERM CREDENTIALS

	Definition of quality or value for credential programs	State financial aid is available for short-term, in-demand programs	Includes short-term credentials in its outcomes-based funding formula	Total
Nevada	●	●	●	1
New Hampshire	●	●	●	0
New Jersey	●	●	●	0
New Mexico	●	●	●	0
New York	●	●	●	0
North Carolina	●	●	●	3
North Dakota	●	●	●	0
Ohio	●	●	●	2
Oklahoma	●	●	●	0
Oregon	●	●	●	1
Pennsylvania	●	●	●	0
Rhode Island	●	●	●	1
South Carolina	●	●	●	0
South Dakota	●	●	●	0
Tennessee	●	●	●	2
Texas	●	●	●	2
Utah	●	●	●	1
Vermont	●	●	●	0
Virginia	●	●	●	2
Washington	●	●	●	1
West Virginia	●	●	●	2
Wisconsin	●	●	●	0
Wyoming	●	●	●	0
Total	11	24	5	

● Yes ● No

Emerging Opportunities

States continue to reform their education and workforce systems to better support career navigation efforts, with several bills on this topic introduced and passed in the last few years. We acknowledge that this landscape scan did not capture some innovative efforts, likely because the policies were adopted after the sources that we used were developed. Below are a few recently enacted state policies that support the four key components of a comprehensive and effective career navigation system that other states should consider adopting for their unique contexts.



Indiana Career Coaching and Navigation Services

In 2023, Indiana passed the House Enrolled Act No. 1002 (HEA 1002) aimed at smoothing college and career pathways for Indiana students.⁴¹ Career navigation was a key feature of the bill and the various initiatives within HEA 1002 make clear the goal of providing meaningful career preparation to students while they are still in high school and, simultaneously, bolstering the state's homegrown-talent-development pipeline to meet employers' workforce needs.

HEA 1002 included a policy charging the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) with developing and implementing a comprehensive career navigation and career-coaching system and establishing career-coaching grants to support this effort. According to JFF's recent Indiana case study, the bill established the Career Scholarships Accounts (CSA), which allows students in grades 10-12 to receive up to \$5,000 to reduce economic barriers that may prevent them from participating in job training.⁴² The case study notes that through this program, policymakers hope to connect students directly with employers to support career navigation and preparation and to increase their exposure to experiential learning programs and that funds can be used for career-coaching and career navigation services, tuition and fees for postsecondary education or training, transportation and equipment, and certification and credentialing exams.⁴³ The CSA program is the first of its kind in Indiana to provide direct support and flexibility to students to pursue pathways of interest, and it is an interesting experiment in removing financial barriers for participation in experiential learning.

In addition, HEA 1002 created an Intermediary Capacity Building Fund that supports intermediaries in helping expand access to CSAs or career coaching and navigation. The legislation also tasked the CHE with creating a Comprehensive Career Coaching and Navigation Framework, which will provide students with comprehensive, relevant, and useful information about career pathways.⁴⁴ To assist with the implementation of the framework, the CHE is awarding Career Coaching Grants to schools, intermediaries, and other career-coaching providers.



Texas Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative

In 2021, the Texas legislature passed the Texas Education and Workforce Alignment Act (House Bill 3767) to formally codify the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative and identify specific measures to align Texas's education and workforce development efforts.⁴⁵ The Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative brings together commissioners from three state agencies: Texas Education Agency, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission. Since the passage of House Bill 3767, the three agencies codeveloped a strategic framework for work-based learning focused on scaling and improving the quality of work-based learning across the state.⁴⁶ The framework provides “program implementation, quality assurances, accountability, and support mechanisms for program providers, including streamlined data collection, cross-sector partnerships, and funding options.”⁴⁷ They also are closely collaborating on a statewide grant opportunity that would support the establishment of Tri-Agency Regional Conveners” across Texas’s core workforce regions to help support designated convenors in their work of bringing together core partners across education, workforce, and community-based organizations to support effective regional pathway approaches for young adults.⁴⁸



My Colorado Journey

Colorado established My Colorado Journey as a collaboration between the Colorado Departments of Labor and Employment, Higher Education, and Human Services and the Workforce Development Council.⁴⁹ The platform is a statewide effort to help young people access education and career data that allows them to make informed choices and accomplish their goals. Students and job seekers can access the platform themselves or work with practitioners (such as educators or counselors) who can use the platform to provide supports.⁵⁰ The platform offers a guided process for users to access an online dashboard that includes suggested goals and key tasks, state tools that can aid career, and a hub to host relevant career and education documents. My Colorado Journey can help students find careers that appeal to their interests and access tools like career pathways and the salaries and benefits associated with roles along these pathways, a program finder for education and training programs across the state, and support resources in their community.

Several states have recognized that technological tools can help augment the in-person services and supports that are provided to young people in a variety of settings by career navigation practitioners. Many are now building their own statewide career navigation platforms or working with third parties to enable practitioners to provide more up-to-date information about available education and career pathways and skills-development opportunities to young people. More research is needed about how many young people utilize these tools, which are most impactful for young people and career navigation practitioners, and what data is needed to inform these platforms and everyone's choices related to their education and career pathway. It is critical that any tech-enabled guidance is personalized to each young person while expanding their access to up-to-date and localized information about what education and career opportunities are available in their area.

Conclusion

A 21st-century state career navigation system operates across K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and community settings to help young people find information about, funding for, and access to a variety of education and workforce pathways that help them meet their full potential and advance in their chosen career. A robust system ensures young people have actionable information, personalized guidance, work-based learning opportunities, and access to an array of postsecondary opportunities, including high-quality short-term credentials. More critically, it is supported by policies that we argue should be connected and aligned across these areas to better meet the needs of young people, fill labor market gaps for employers, and efficiently steward public funds.

This report offers a first opportunity to comprehensively examine states' progress across several key policy areas in support of career navigation. However, more work will need to be done to better understand how policymakers are supporting young people as they consider their postsecondary options and career interests.

The ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF plans to release a policy agenda later this year offering additional actions state leaders and others can take to improve their career navigation systems. The center also will work to convene young people, practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and others to further explore what high-quality career navigation services and supports are and how policymakers at all levels of government can take action to empower the next generation to chart their own course.



Appendix:

Methodology

To conceptualize an ideal career navigation system, JFF held a series of listening sessions and workgroup meetings in 2023 and 2024 with over 25 leading practitioners from secondary, postsecondary, workforce development, and community-based organizations as well as policymakers and national policy organizations, to assess existing career navigation services and learn what else is needed to better support students and workers, including in-school and out-of-school youth. We analyzed their input to develop the four key components needed for a comprehensive state career navigation system to help youth and young adults access and use key career navigation services.

To assess state progress in implementing these components, JFF determined the policies that should be in place across each component and translated them into a series of research questions to guide the collection and analysis of available state policy information. For example, a policy related to state support of work-based learning opportunities for high school students would have a corresponding research question such as: “Does the state have a formal definition of work-based learning that lists multiple kinds of activities or experiences for high school students?”

JFF reviewed information from publicly available 50-state policy scans (inclusive of DC) to answer each research question and convey the prevalence of state adoption of key career navigation components. JFF conducted a literature review of these policy scans to identify the most appropriate source of information for each research question. Sources were selected based on the reputation of the research organization, the timeliness of their policy research (for example, narrowing to sources that have been released since the COVID-19 outbreak), and the detail and relevance of the information available. Our efforts primarily focused on the adoption of formal policies, such as funding apparatus, rules, legislation, and administration policy. While several organizations have studied policies that fall under the umbrella of career navigation, this is the first report to offer a comprehensive review of the policies across the key areas we believe are critical for effective career navigation across K-12 and postsecondary education and workforce systems.





After collecting this data, we developed a database to document the adoption of each policy on a state-by-state basis. We analyzed this data to establish overall state progress, identify states that are ahead of the curve in implementing these policies, and highlight key gaps in information.

Our approach comes with several important limitations. While we curated publicly available policy information, we were unable to independently verify it. We did not review primary sources (for example, state code) to assess whether these policies were implemented effectively. In addition, some policy information we reviewed may have become outdated due to subsequent state policy changes. Moreover, JFF acknowledges

that the existence of a policy does not necessarily mean that the policy has been implemented, enforced, or effective. Despite these limitations, we are confident that this publication paints a compelling portrait of an ideal career navigation system at the state level and will increase the desire of leaders in both parties to improve access to and the quality of career navigation services in their states.

Additional information on data sources

JFF pulled the information included in this document from several sources. We are grateful to these organizations for their work to uncover how states are adopting critical policies in support of career navigation systems. A list of sources for each component is below. We encourage readers to review these publications for additional insights into how states can adopt policies that better meet the career navigation needs of young people ages 16-24.

	Component	Data Source for Analysis of State Policy Progress
	Actionable Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strada Education Foundation, State Opportunity Index (n.d., accessed April 30, 2025).
	Personalized Guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coalition for Career Development Center, Condition of Career Readiness in the United States (2022).
	Work-Based Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Student Assistance and Bellwether Education Partners, Working to Learn and Learning to Work (2021), an analysis of state policies on work-based learning in high school. • Apprenticeship for America, How States are Driving the Expansion of Apprenticeships: State Apprenticeship Policy Scan (2024). • New America, What Does Youth Apprenticeship Mean? (2024).
	Short-Term Credentials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HCM Strategists, A Typology and Policy Landscape Analysis of State Investments in Short-term Credential Pathways (2023), and A 2024 Update of State Investments in Short-term Credential Pathways.

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