

A key lesson from Achieve’s *Taking Root* research on sustaining state education policy change is the importance of connecting and integrating reform policies – so that the whole is stronger than the individual parts. As states commit to higher graduation requirements that better prepare high school students for college and careers, this strategy is especially important. It’s often easy to engage K-12 and postsecondary education stakeholders in planning and communications, while the possible connections with a state’s workforce policies and programs are overlooked. But education reforms and economic development strategies should be two sides of the same coin, as they share the common goal of developing a well-educated, skilled workforce.

Workforce training and economic development efforts have their own constituencies, usually comprised of employers, community college and business leaders, and labor officials. Imagine how much more powerful a state’s effort to improve college and career readiness can be when these voices are part of and engaged throughout the policy adoption and implementation process.

Finally, connecting graduation requirements to workforce training programs and economic development initiatives just makes sense: State strategies should work in tandem, not at odds or in isolation. Ensuring a state’s K-12 reform agenda is in alignment with – and reinforced by – the state’s economic development and workforce development strategies can go a long way towards creating efficiencies in resource allocation and ultimately ensuring real change.

There are four steps state leaders can take to better align K-12 and workforce strategies and policies:

- 1. *Set Shared Goals***
- 2. *Align Existing Policies, Programs and Resources Wherever Possible***
- 3. *Use Economic/Labor Data to Inform Education and Training Programs***
- 4. *Leverage the Leadership of Business and Labor in Making Higher Graduation Requirements Successful***

Set Shared Goals

State leaders should think broadly about how their education and economic development policies can be intertwined and work towards the same purpose. The goal of new high school graduation requirements is to ensure more students leave high school well-prepared for college (advanced training or a two- or four-year degree program) or high-skill, well-paid jobs. How does this goal relate to statewide and regional economic development efforts? How does it relate to existing job training, adult education and career and technical education programs? How is the state ensuring it has the workers it needs to fill its most in-demand and highest-skilled job openings? State and local leaders in education, postsecondary, workforce training and economic development should take the time to answer these questions together.

One key way states have met with success in setting shared goals that cross K-12, postsecondary and workforce system boundaries and spur cross-sector collaboration is by creating P-20 coordinating councils. Usually comprised of public agency leaders and business, labor and education stakeholders, P-20 councils can serve as a needed bridge for connecting disparate systems around a common agenda. They also can be important forums for building and sustaining broad support within and outside government agencies for change. Whether it’s called a P-20 Council or something else, the most important feature of this type of organization is that it has a broad charter to work on education *and* workforce challenges in tandem—and the right stakeholders at the table.

In Arkansas, for example, Governor Mike Beebe first convened the Arkansas Workforce Cabinet—comprised of the directors of the Arkansas Department of Workforce Services, Arkansas Workforce Investment Board, Arkansas Department of Workforce Education, Arkansas Economic Development Commission, Arkansas Department of Higher Education, Arkansas Department of Education, Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges, and Arkansas Science and Technology Authority—in 2007. The Cabinet meets regularly to ensure the various state agencies are moving together towards the same goal of a prepared workforce and a strong economy in Arkansas. One unique element of the Cabinet is that there are coordination meetings attended by each participating Department’s main communications point person to ensure consistent messaging and outreach across the state agencies. In addition, under the guidance of the Cabinet, Arkansas recently expanded *Arkansas Works*, a statewide initiative to coordinate education, training and economic development. The *Arkansas Works* website includes the College and Career Planning System for students and adults to get information on education, training and job openings, and for employers to connect with potential employees.¹

The most successful P-20 councils are those that are institutionalized or recognized officially by law or executive order and have real decision-making authority. They also are given a specific task or problem to solve; they aren’t just convened to meet periodically to “coordinate.” Effective P-20 councils don’t limit themselves to simply talking and sharing. Arizona’s P-20 Coordinating Council, for example, commissioned research by the National Center on Higher Education Management Systems into how well the state was preparing students to meet the demand for high-demand and high-wage jobs over the next decades—and then used the data to set clear statewide goals for all agencies to close any gaps.² California, Colorado, Indiana and other states also have conducted similar research to pinpoint what is usually a mismatch between the existing and projected demand for high-skilled jobs in certain industries and the state’s current and future ability to ensure workers are available who can compete successfully for these jobs. That information can be a powerful driver for shared education and workforce development goals.

States’ emerging STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) initiatives that seek to grow industries in these areas as well as workers prepared for these fields also can be important venues for bringing common energy and aligned action to state education and workforce training efforts. In Maryland, for example, Governor Martin O’Malley has set an ambitious goal of increasing the number of STEM college graduates by 40 percent from the present level of 4,400 graduates by 2015—and he has directed different state agencies and higher education institutions to align their efforts to ensure this goal is met.

Finally, an increasing number of states are experimenting with setting college completion goals and moving towards performance funding for their state higher education institutions that make progress; a next step in these states should be to more tightly connect these discrete postsecondary goals to workforce and training goals, and potentially economic development goals.

¹ For more information see, [Hhttp://arworks.arkansas.gov/Pages/default.aspx](http://arworks.arkansas.gov/Pages/default.aspx)H

² Read “A Feasibility and Demand Study for the State of Arizona” here, [Hhttp://www.azcommerce.com/doclib/wrkforce/az%20feasibility%20study.pdf](http://www.azcommerce.com/doclib/wrkforce/az%20feasibility%20study.pdf)H

Align Existing Policies, Programs and Resources Wherever Possible

One important starting place for a P-20 council or similar coordinating council is to sort out the myriad of ways the state already prepares students and workers for the workforce. In particular, states receive dollars from a wide range of federal programs that aim – albeit in different ways – to promote a trained workforce, including, but not limited to, the Workforce Investment Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Carl T. Perkins Act, STEM grants, and WIRED Initiative. Many of the sources of funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Department of Labor, and even Department of Energy are all working towards the same goal of creating strong workforces. Yet these policies rarely work together to ensure efficiencies and a strong return to investment—in part because the dollars flow to different state agencies that have not traditionally coordinated the programs or used the resources to advance common, statewide education and workforce training goals.

A critical first step in aligning a state’s K-12 and workforce strategies is to conduct a scan of the various federal, state and local resources and programs to identify overlap, opportunities for cost sharing (and cost savings), and ways in which the various programs can be better coordinated toward the goal of improving educational opportunities and training. Key questions to ask could include:

- How much is your state spending on career and technical education at the secondary and postsecondary level, factoring in resources invested by the state (in different agencies), federal government (competitive or block grants)?
- How many job training programs are there in your state, by industry/career cluster (offered by technical centers, community colleges, and other state/locally-supported facilities)? How does this compare with the jobs/skills most demanded by your state’s employers and business community?
- How much is the state currently spending on job training/workforce development (offered by technical centers, community colleges, and other state -supported facilities) across various state agencies? How much federal funding is the state receiving for job training/workforce development (including through Community-Based Job Training Grants, Workforce Investment grants, etc.?) How many regional or locally-supported job training/workforce development programs are there in your state (offered by technical centers, community colleges, and other state/locally-supported facilities)?
- Approximately how much is your state’s business community spending on recruitment and training of new and existing employees each year?

Beyond simply identifying and aligning different funding streams, California points the way to an additional option for better connecting traditional K-12 education with career and technical education. There, policymakers and foundations have made a concerted effort to experiment with “multiple pathways.” Already in place in hundreds of the state’s high schools, the multiple pathways approach supports college and career readiness for all by bringing together an academic, college-preparatory component, a career-technical component, a work-based learning component, and a career and academic counseling support component. One promising sign that the efforts connecting academics and technical education are working is the increase in the number of CTE courses that count toward courses required for admissions into the state university system. Most existing pathway programs exist as schools within schools or career academies, but now—with support of the James Irvine Foundation—10 school districts are experimenting with bringing the multiple pathways concept to scale to serve many more students across their high schools.

Use Economic/Labor Data to Inform Education and Training Efforts

K-12 and postsecondary education should be aware of the jobs and skills most demanded by their state (and in their region) to ensure their postsecondary capacity, career and technical education, workforce development and job training programs are aligned with those needs and can help develop prepared members of the workforce.

A critical starting place is to ensure a state's longitudinal data system can track students from K-12 education through postsecondary and into the workforce. According to the Data Quality Campaign's most recent state survey, just 10 states currently have the ability to link their K-12 and workforce data; doing so should be a priority for all states, as the information allows state leaders to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of existing state and local programs and make informed decisions about where to shift resources and investments. Community colleges, job training programs and high school career and technical education programs all should be focused on preparing students for growing career areas and jobs that will be in high demand.

To support this sort of decision-making, Florida has one of the nation's most robust longitudinal data systems. Specifically, the Florida Department of Education has linked K-12 data to postsecondary education and workforce data for over 30 years, now through the Florida PK20 Education Data Warehouse, which in total connects data from 26 distinct systems. With such robust data in hand, Florida is able to drill down and regularly report on career programs and on the performance of students enrolled in industry-certified career education programs; its data also are used to evaluate the relationship between education and workforce preparedness and success.³

Reports on how well a state is preparing its workforce to meet anticipated demands—such as those produced in Arizona, Maryland and other states and described above—also can be powerful platforms to at least get the right conversations started throughout a state.

Leverage the Leadership of Business and Labor in Making Higher Graduation Requirements Successful

Beyond the coordination of governance, resources and data across the state, there are other opportunities to engage business leaders, unions and employers to ensure strong education and workforce alignment. Employees can provide a bridge between K-12 and career readiness by helping to inform career and technical education curricula, by partnering with job training programs (including those available to students in high school and adults) to provide relevant on-the-job experiences, and by validating more rigorous education programs and policies. Business and labor leaders also can signal—through their actions, endorsements and participation—the kind and the level of preparation they expect from future employees.

In Indiana, for example, the state chamber of commerce, Indiana State Building and Construction Trades Council and Indiana Manufacturing Association all played key advocacy roles in 1994 to encourage the Indiana Commission on Higher Education and State Board of Education to create the first-in-the-country college- and career-ready diploma (Core 40), which specifies the courses students should take to prepare for life after high school. In 2005, with their continued advocacy, Core 40 became the default requirement for earning a high school diploma in Indiana. In addition, students can now earn a Core 40 diploma with academic honors or technical honors, depending on a student's career interests.

³ For more information about Florida's data system, see <http://www.fldoe.org/arm/pdf/afs.pdf>

In 2008, Hawaii increased the rigor of a voluntary college-prep diploma students can opt up into. Along with higher course requirements, all students on track to earning this diploma – now dubbed the “Step Up Diploma” – must also pass an end-of-course exam in Algebra II. Completion of the Step Up Diploma is a pre-requisite for a range of state scholarships and admission to a number of public four-year postsecondary institutions – incentives that are not uncommonly attached to high school course and assessment requirements. However, Hawaii has broken new ground by also working to attach meaningful employer incentives to the Step Up Diploma. Three statewide employment programs – Hawaii Carpenters or Drywall Apprenticeship Program, City Mill, and Island Movers – have policies in place to waive their required pre-employment math test for students who have earned the Step Up Diploma. Three Hawaii electric companies have also set policies allowing students who have earned the Step Up Diploma automatic advancement in the hiring process and will offer summer internships to current high school students on track to earning the Diploma.

The Bottom Line

For the college- and career-ready graduation requirements to take root in your state, it is critical to integrate the policy into the state’s broader policy framework, including linking K-12, postsecondary and workforce policies and programs. The more the various policies are integrated together, the harder it is to dismantle any one of the individual policies, and student transitions from K-12 to postsecondary and/or the workforce will only be made smoother. In particular, ensuring a state’s K-12 system is in alignment with – and reinforced by – the state’s economic development and workforce development strategies can go a long way towards creating efficiencies in governance and resource allocation, making the case for more dynamic and rigorous knowledge and skills development at the high school level, engaging key business and labor representatives around education reform, and developing strong P-20-workforce pipelines to the benefit of the greater community.