

CAPITOL RESEARCH

● ● ● EDUCATION & WORKFORCE POLICY

BUILDING CAREER READINESS

State education leaders strive to help students enter the workforce prepared to succeed—to be career ready. The term career readiness is used in education systems at the national, state and local levels to describe the skills, attributes and preparedness students need to enter the workforce.

Likewise, college readiness is commonly described as the skills, attributes and educational requirements needed to succeed in college. College readiness is also considered to include the ability of a student to succeed in college without having to take remediation courses.

Career readiness is paired by many states with the term college readiness as college and career readiness. While 36 states and the District of Columbia have state definitions of college and career readiness, 18 states do not have set definitions for college or career readiness.¹

What is career readiness?

While there is no universal agreement on a common definition for college or career readiness, the Career Readiness Partner Council provides the following definition for career readiness.

“A career-ready person effectively navigates pathways that connect education and employment to achieve a fulfilling, financially-secure and successful career. A career is more than just a job. Career readiness has no defined endpoint. To be career ready in our ever-changing global economy requires adaptability and a commitment to lifelong learning, along with mastery of key academic, technical and workplace knowledge, skills and dispositions that vary from one career to another and change over time as a person progresses along a developmental continuum. Knowledge, skills and dispositions that are inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing.”²

While college and career readiness planning definitions vary state by state, the central themes of academic knowledge, skills and assessment scores are found in most definitions. These definitions provide the vision for states’ education programming around career development.³



What does career readiness look like in the states?

In its report, *Opportunities and Options: Making Career Preparation Work for Students*, the Council of Chief State School Officers expressed concern over antiquated career preparatory programs and the lack of responsiveness to the needs of the business community by secondary schools across the nation.⁴ The U.S. Chamber of Commerce also highlighted concerns among the business community that education and workforce systems are not providing employers the skilled workers businesses need.⁵

In light of these concerns, states are taking significant steps to ensure that students are college and career ready. The Tennessee Promise program, which is both a scholarship and mentoring program focused on increasing the number of students who attend college, provides two years of free college at community or technical colleges in the state for all students.⁶



This innovative program, coupled with the work-based learning opportunities the state provides for students in high school, is part of Tennessee's concerted efforts to improve the workforce by improving the education pipeline and working with the business community to meet their needs for skilled workers.

What does career readiness look like for students with disabilities?

Forty-two states and the District of Columbia require or strongly encourage schools to implement individualized person-centered plans (also referred to as individualized learning plans (ILPs)) as a means of facilitating college and career readiness among all youth, including those with disabilities. Person-centered plans are defined by the 2020 Federal Youth Transition Plan as transition planning which is self-directed and strength-based with youth taking on increasingly greater decision-making and leadership roles as they move towards adulthood.^{7,8} The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth describes ILPs as both a document and a process that students use – with support from school counselors, teachers, and parents – to define their career goals and postsecondary plans in order to inform the student's decisions about their courses and activities throughout high school and beyond.⁹ A map of person-centered planning state policies is included on the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy website.¹⁰

Currently, students with significant disabilities may be excluded from participating in the ILP process in several states. The criteria used by states to determine which students, if any, are held exempt from participation in the ILP process varies greatly and in most cases a student's parent or guardian must sign off for this exemption to occur. The lack of a common definition for youth with significant disabilities contributes to the lack of state-level data gathered on the number of students who were exempt.¹¹ As a part of the services delivery issues in career development planning, accessible career development materials and career information are not readily available to all students, and students with significant disabilities in many districts do not receive career development materials or services at all.¹²

The Council of State Governments and the National Conference of State Legislatures, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, established and convened the National Task Force on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities in 2016. The task force recommended that states ensure that laws include—and do not provide exemptions for—students with disabilities in the career readiness programs and that these programs and systems be accessible to students with disabilities. The task force highlighted Kentucky, which has legislative language that affirms the complementary nature of person-centered planning and individualized education plans for students with disabilities as they transition from school to adulthood. Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut and Wisconsin also have issued policy directives to this effect.¹³

What innovation is going on in the states?

Preparing students for a typical career path today does not necessarily follow the traditional course of high school or college leading to long-term employment with a single employer. Rather, according to the most recent available data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average worker today stays at each of his or her jobs for 4.4 years, with the workforce's youngest employees staying less than three years.¹⁴ That means the typical worker will have 15 to 20 jobs over his or her working life. One reality of today's workforce, however, has remained the same: youth need to develop the skills, both general and career-specific, that are desired by employers in order to be suited to the highly competitive labor force.

Statewide implementation of quality comprehensive career development programs and activities is a promising strategy states use to achieve the dual goals of college and career readiness.¹⁵ Quality career development includes providing youth with work-based learning opportunities and developmentally appropriate career development skill-building activities in three skill domains-- self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management. As a part of comprehensive career development programs, states are focusing on work-based learning opportunities to drive student interest in career development and to help students acquire the skills needed to succeed in the workforce. Recent research shows that at all educational levels (P-20) and all age levels (youth through adult), career development positively impacts academic achievement,^{16,17,18} career maturity,^{19,20} educational motivation, coping skills, self-esteem,²¹ and age-appropriate exploration and career decision-making.²² For low performing and at-risk youth, strategies like career development that increase the relevance and meaningfulness of their education opportunities have been found to improve academic performance and course interest.²³

Oregon, South Carolina and Wisconsin are leading the nation in recruiting employers, preparing and placing students in brokered work-based learning opportunities consistent with their individualized career goals, and structuring those experiences through the use of person-centered plans.²⁴ Oregon focuses on a person-centered planning model that is embedded throughout their public education, workforce and social services systems.²⁵ South Carolina's career readiness system has an emphasis on internships, job shadowing, mentoring and work-based learning with related classroom instruction. The career development programming in the state of South Carolina is closely aligned with the state's 12 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act regions giving the state the ability to meet the labor needs of the business community.²⁶ Similar to the South Carolina model, Wisconsin also focuses on skills standards certificates programs, job shadowing, service learning and internships as parts of their career readiness programming. Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship Program is a 2 year model for juniors and seniors in high school that includes a minimum of 900 hours of paid work-based learning and four semesters of applicable classroom instruction.²⁷ These states are finding success in preparing youth for the workforce by working with the business community and providing opportunities for students to engage in career planning activities that are experiential.



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