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# **State Policy Playbook for Youth Career Readiness**

This playbook provides ways in which policymakers can build robust statewide approaches to youth career readiness. A successful education-to-workforce system focuses on three core elements: **exploration of careers, experimentation with careers, and navigation to careers and the requisite postsecondary education.** We offer six policy proposals for each of these core components.

# EXPLORATION

**ESTABLISH DEFINITIONS:** States should have a formal public definition of middle school career exploration and ensure a unified definition is adopted across relevant agencies and partners, including K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and relevant community-based organizations. Arkansas [defines](#) career awareness and exploration activities as those that expose students to career and technical and academic fields of study, which may include field trips, guest speakers, community services, dedicated curricula, or other activities designed to introduce students to occupations that are found to be in demand in the state.

**DEDICATE FUNDING:** States should use state or federal funding sources to support career exploration for middle school students. The Alabama State Department of Education allowed school districts to apply for a [Career and Technical Education \(CTE\) Middle Grades Innovative Grant](#) to establish, expand, start up, or reinvent CTE experiences for middle school students. ALSDE also invested in an online platform to support students' career planning called the [Alabama Career Planning System](#), and allocated state funds to support Career Coaching positions for grades K-12.

**COLLECT DATA:** States should collect data on student participation in middle school career exploration opportunities in the state. [Georgia's College and Career Ready Performance Index Dashboard](#) captures a Readiness metric, which measures whether students are participating in activities preparing them for and demonstrating readiness for the next level, college, or career. Users can filter performance data by district and student population.

**SET STANDARDS:** States should establish standard practices and quality indicators for career exploration in middle schools. Pennsylvania Career Standards require [middle-level education](#) to include career education, exposure to various career options, and the educational preparation necessary to achieve those options. To support this, PA developed [Career Education and Work \(CEW\) Standards](#) that describe what students should know and be able to do in the workplace, including a [career portfolio](#) beginning in grade 8 and continuing until graduation. In addition, [Chapter 339 of PA Code](#) requires districts to write a guidance plan for the development and implementation of a comprehensive, sequential program of guidance services for grades K-12.

**SUPPORT TRAINING:** States should facilitate professional development for school counselors and other in-school adult changemakers in career exploration. The Arizona Department of Education provides [resources and links](#) for career literacy teachers' professional development. The Department also trains school district personnel to implement [MyFutureAZ](#), a career development and job skills exploration platform.

**MAKE IT A REQUIREMENT:** States should require middle school students to complete career exploration activities. In Idaho, 8th graders are [required](#) to complete learning plans for high school and beyond before transitioning to 9th grade. Every student in grade 7 or 8 enrolled in a public school district, a specially chartered district, or a public charter school completes one or more career exploration courses. Such courses should align with the "first step" standards set by the state board of education for career technical education.



# EXPERIMENTATION

**ESTABLISH DEFINITIONS:** States should have a formal definition of work-based learning, which clearly defines a set of activities and experiences that qualify as WBL for high school students (such as apprenticeships, internships, school-based enterprises, etc.). The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) has a [clear definition of WBL](#), as well as definitions of different experiences that are considered WBL (e.g., internships, school-based enterprises).

**ENSURE BROAD ACCESS:** States should ensure WBL opportunities are accessible to all students, not just those in registered Career and Technical Education (CTE) high school pathways. New Mexico is an example of a state where students must craft a [“next step plan”](#) beginning in the eighth grade. Because of the breadth of options students have through their next step plan, all students are eligible to participate in WBL experiences.

**DESIGNATE INTERMEDIARIES:** States should have a system or organization designed to facilitate WBL opportunities and/or public-private partnerships that support access to paid or for-credit WBL opportunities for high school students. Delaware Technical Community College (DTCC) is the lead agency for WBL in the state. The [Office of Work-based Learning](#) (OWBL) operates out of DTCC and serves as an intermediary to support connections among employers, school districts, and business/industry partners to scale WBL.

**DEDICATE FUNDING:** States should create dedicated funding streams and/or budget line items solely or primarily focused on creating and expanding work-based learning opportunities. Massachusetts provides annual funding to its [Connecting Activities](#) program through a line item in the state’s budget. CA funds are allocated by the state Department of Education to all 16 local workforce development boards in the state. There are also planning grants available to [Innovation Career Pathways](#) schools.

**COLLECT DATA:** States should have processes in place to track student participation in WBL opportunities and their outcomes. As a component of [Virginia’s Master Schedule Collection](#), WBL participation is captured by the 11 WBL experience types for gender, ethnicity, English learners, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged, military connected, unaccompanied homeless, youth in foster care, single parents, nontraditional students, and out of workforce. School districts can access subgroup-level student data for each WBL experience.

**SET STANDARDS:** States should have clear quality standards for WBL programs operated by schools and mechanisms in place to hold all high school WBL programs, not just CTE programs funded through Perkins) accountable to these expectations. New York has defined in its [WBL Manual](#) the quality expectations to which WBL programs are held accountable. Registered WBL programs must have: a certified teacher or guidance counselor to serve as WBL coordinator, an industry advisory committee, safety training prior to placement at a worksite, supervised on-the-job training, related in-school instruction, a memorandum of agreement between schools and employers, a student training plan, and an employer evaluation. These programs are required to reregister with the state every few years, ensuring programs meet minimum expectations. PA developed Career Education and Work (CEW) Standards that describe what students should know and be able to do in the workplace, including a career portfolio beginning in grade 8 and continuing until graduation. In addition, Chapter 339 of PA Code requires districts to write a guidance plan for the development and implementation of a comprehensive, sequential program of guidance services for grades K-12.



# NAVIGATION

**TIE FUNDING TO ESTABLISHED DEFINITIONS:** States should set a clear, refined, and explicit definition of quality or value for short-term credential programs and restrict the use of state funds only to programs adhering to this quality criteria. [Florida's Senate Bill 98](#) establishes 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.

**LEVERAGE FEDERAL FUNDING FOR TRAINING:** States should prioritize federal Perkins V state leadership funds to improve career guidance programs. Colorado uses [Perkins V state leadership funds](#) to “Provide high-quality comprehensive professional development activities focused on opportunities for growth and engagement with staff, educators and stakeholders...Improve advisement and counseling for CTE programs in a way that does not supplant other funds for this purpose and...Provide a CCCS staff person for federal CTSOs and to provide training and development for advisers and students across the state.”

**INVEST IN FINANCIAL AID FOR ALL POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION:** States should ensure financial aid is available for short-term, in-demand programs so they are free or low-cost for students in need, and should tie financial aid for short-term credentials to existing labor market demand. As part of Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb's [Next Level Jobs Initiative](#), the Workforce Ready Grant (SB 198; 2017) allows residents who have earned a high school diploma but not a postsecondary degree to enroll in no-cost training programs in certain high-demand fields. The grant may be used only for 125 high-value certificate programs in advanced manufacturing, building and construction, health and life sciences, IT and business technology, and transportation and logistics.

**SET STANDARDS:** States should have quality standards for career counseling and advisement at the secondary level. The [Michigan Career Development Model](#) (MCDM) is a framework, guided by legislation, that engages school communities, students, and their support networks in intentional and meaningful career awareness, exploration, and preparation for all students.

**COLLECT DATA:** States should collect data on at least three types of nondegree and noncredit postsecondary education and training programs and link employment-outcomes information to, at minimum, college-issued certificate information. Kentucky leaders have developed a robust cradle-to-career data infrastructure that is maintained by the [Kentucky Center for Statistics](#) (KY Stats). KY Statsconnects, 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.

**SUPPORT TRAINING:** States should provide targeted professional development for career counseling and advisement at the secondary level. DC provides [professional development](#) to help CTE educators and counselors stay up to date on career education trends and information.

