Finding a Way Forward

An Analysis of Federal Policy and Learner Pathways

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APRIL 2024

Bellwether

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Introduction

"Pathways" is the term for the full universe of intentional and supported trajectories for learners. In an ideal system, every learner understands and participates in one or more pathways as they move from adolescence through adulthood, with a special focus in this primer on a secure transition to adulthood (approximately ages 16-24).

Young people aged 16-24 are learners who need clear pathways to navigate from K-12 education into careers that align with their aptitudes, interests, and life goals. Today's learners face increasingly complex challenges — some new and others long-standing — as they seek appropriate, affordable, and workforce-relevant pathways in traditional and nontraditional educational settings, including the workplace. These challenges are most deeply felt by underserved and historically marginalized learners (e.g., low-income, Black, Hispanic, and Native American learners, among others).[1]

Learners who cannot access appropriate information, navigational support, and options to make supported and informed choices risk inequitable completion rates for credentials and degrees, "variable and opaque value" when completing a pathway, and "overwhelming cost and debt."[2] Often, they experience a lack of connectivity between educational experiences (e.g., two- and four-year college, apprenticeships, and training programs) and workplace requirements (e.g., knowledge, skills, and credentials). The disruption of remote learning and social isolation amid the COVID-19 pandemic added layers of chronic absenteeism and unmet mental health needs for many learners.[3] The federal government has an important role to play in bolstering high-quality support for all young people to make the transition to adulthood on secure pathways in learning and work.

How can federal policies support improved access to and completion of pathways opportunities, and for whom?

Multiple federal policies provide guidance and funding to enable states to develop and support high-quality pathways. Learners benefit when these pathways provide clear, well-planned sequences of courses and experiences across K-12 and postsecondary systems, guided by informative data (e.g., completion rates and potential income range), and navigation (i.e., human and technological) assistance.

When pathways are developed in partnership with employers, K-12 and postsecondary education stakeholders, and other community-based organizations, learners experience a seamless progression through their pathway(s) and attainment of valuable credentials leading to workforce opportunities.

Federal Policy Guides and Supports Stakeholders

It is important for those working in (or adjacent to) pathways (e.g., policymakers, educators, and service providers) to understand the challenges faced by learners and how federal policy and actions (e.g., guidance and technical assistance) can enable or constrain their work. If designed well, comprehensive federal policy and action will guide and support stakeholders working in (or adjacent to) pathways. Poorly designed federal policy limits the ability of stakeholders to fully support learners. For example, excessive reporting and financial monitoring of federal grants can limit stakeholder capacity by taking vital time away from student support.[4] Reducing the complexity of federal policy and funding will break down navigation barriers and improve access for learners, families, and stakeholders.

Federal Policy Creates Collaboration and Connections

Unfortunately, the panoply of federal pathways programs and nonlinear organizational design and governance reinforces natural silos within and across at least eight federal agencies and 40 or more programs that hinder a cohesive approach to pathways.[i] Federal policymakers and their staff need to recognize the connectedness of multiple sets of education, workforce, and adjacent policy issues. Federal policy plays a leading role in bringing together actors and agencies that work in specific silos, setting a course for well-intentioned, more cohesive and connected state and local efforts.

Federal Policy Stabilizes State Efforts

At the state level, pathways policy is already developing with differing goals and varying degrees of success. The lack of cohesive federal policy creates state-level challenges. State policy also experiences a differing focus on outcomes — ranging from addressing labor market needs to more equitably increasing economic mobility of learners, to goals in between these markers, such as defining the economic value of credentials.[5] Strategic federal support creates a basic infrastructure for the pathways system and improves state-level effectiveness. Stability measures improving cohesion include providing guidance around funding priorities for historically marginalized learners, establishing primary goals and aligned measures, and connecting data across systems and agencies.

Effective federal policymaking demands an understanding of the current state of pathways in the United States for policymakers and their staff in education and workforce issue areas and adjacent areas — as well as all the stakeholders working in or near pathways. This primer, informed by research, analysis, and voices from the field, provides an overview of the pathways landscape across the country, proposes a research-based vision for pathways participation, and elevates approaches to move federal policy forward on behalf of all learners.

"This work matters to me because the current siloed secondary and postsecondary education systems are failing our students."

—ALEX PERRY, FORESIGHT LAW + POLICY

"Many young people lack clarity about and access to meaningful pathways — pathways that can actually lead to a livable wage. Economic mobility in the U.S. is abysmal compared to many other countries, and our federal government has a responsibility to change that."

—HORATIO BLACKMAN, NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

Overview of Pathways

In an ideal system, pathways comprise the full universe of intentional and supported trajectories that every learner understands and participates in as they move from adolescence through adulthood, with a special focus in this primer on a secure transition to adulthood (approximately ages 16-24).

In this kind of system, learners receive consistent, knowledgeable guidance, beginning in middle school, from well-qualified counselors and navigators to help them choose among many high-quality, structured experiences designed to prepare them for a well-aligned option after they complete high school. A range of possible experiences should, at a minimum, include career and technical education (CTE), work-based learning, early postsecondary opportunities (e.g., advanced coursework, Advanced Placement (AP), and early college high school), and postsecondary programs of study leading to industry-recognized credentials and/or degrees. Learners are supported over time to find, experience, and stay on (or move among) any pathways that prepare them for career choices that align with their desired social, economic, and personal outcomes.[ii]

Every young person is on a path to adulthood, but some do not receive the benefit of supported pathways and instead take routes that are unsupported (or even actively harmful), resulting in lifelong consequences. For example, a learner in an under-resourced school who does not have access to skilled counseling or navigation support may find themselves on a misaligned path that leads to debt, unemployment, or underemployment, and foreclosed future opportunity.[6] The goal is to ensure every learner can find — and stay on — positive, nurturing pathways that lead to a stable career with a sustaining wage.

Pathways are also interdependent. Stakeholders need to connect their efforts across the K-12, postsecondary, and workforce sectors; each sector affects the learner's trajectory, so it is in the best interest of all education and workplace participants to establish strong, supportive, and success-building pathways.

Today's pathways programs and services lack three key features, among others, that make the experience for many learners less than ideal: 1) there is no concerted federal cross-agency engagement centered on a national vision, 2) there is no field consensus on the elements of high-quality programming

and how to embed them into policies and systems, and, 3) there is insufficient engagement of all learner populations and key stakeholders.

Lack of federal cross-agency engagement: There is no concerted, aligned engagement among federal policymakers and administrative leaders, which prevents a coherent national vision for pathways.[7] This lack of engagement causes a variety of operational challenges, including the lack of a coherent data infrastructure to facilitate the collection and dissemination of data that would tell a comprehensive story of pathways learners. A national vision and data strategy would facilitate better decision-making and continuous improvement among learners and practitioners.

Lack of defining and providing high-quality elements: Once federal leadership establishes a national vision, a supportive federal policy approach should build momentum toward consensus to define and provide those program elements that lead to improved outcomes. For example, models exist for defining high-quality elements in areas such as CTE programs[8] and youth apprenticeships,[9] but not for all pathways options such as non-degree credentials. And without proper information and navigation, not all learners know

how to assess and access high-quality pathways options. All learners need clearly delineated high-quality options, especially Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income learners.[10]

Lack of sufficient learner and stakeholder engagement: Stakeholders in all sectors — policymakers, government officials, educators, service providers, employers, and others — have an interest in improved pathways policy at the federal level but might not fully realize it. Federal leadership is essential to support stakeholders who care about equitable learner outcomes, economic mobility, and positive career and life trajectories. This leadership can bring together the fragmented and frustrated pathways-relevant needs of learners, educators, service providers, program implementers, and state agencies. Multiagency federal alignment and support both guides and builds upon the work done by states. The framework provided in the next section explores the role of each stakeholder.

"Diverse organizations can ensure policies are developed based on input from broader constituencies, so they have a greater chance of addressing problems facing different stakeholders, rather than solving issues for some, while exacerbating them for others."

—TAYLOR WHITE, NEW AMERICA

Framework

A framework for federal policy and action related to pathways is critical to map the ecosystem of stakeholders and key decision-making points. Aside from a limited number of cases such as federal student aid, federal policy and actions related to pathways do not directly affect learners. Instead, federal policies typically create changes in more attenuated ways mediated by state governments, municipal agencies, community-based organizations, and others.

This framework is not intended to be *the* definitive one, but provides a helpful way to understand the key primary actors in this system for whom policies must be designed and responses must be considered. The system must be equitable, accessible, and feature high-quality components.

An effective framework like this one also tracks the ways in which **federal policy** cascades to those **state administrative entities** that delegate **implementation**, which supports those providing **service delivery** to the intended beneficiaries: **learners** (Figure). Learners are supported by services delivered by individuals and organizations that directly work with them. Implementers create and implement service opportunities. State administrative entities provide regulation and oversight, and federal policy provides policy, funding, and other services that shape these experiences across the flow.

FIGURE: PATHWAYS FRAMEWORK FOR FEDERAL POLICY AND ACTION
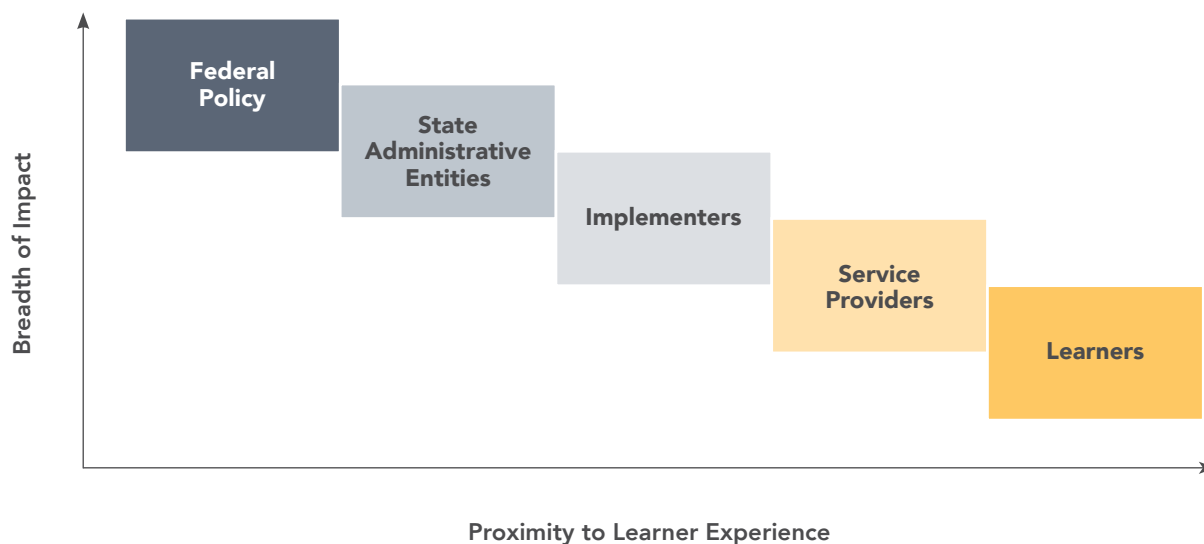
Federal policy should feed, drive, and stabilize the pathways system. Federal funding mechanisms and guidance on preferred uses of that funding feed the work of stakeholders. Federal policy drives the system by creating incentives and disincentives attached to funding and guidance. Stabilization comes through the coherence provided by definitions, eligibility criteria, data collection, established performance standards, and more. The most effective federal policy reforms will:

- Account for all learner populations, particularly those from marginalized communities, including their backgrounds, aspirations, and needs.

- Develop a shared vision that supports local and learner goals.

- Provide sufficient funding (and/or funding guidance) to ensure all learners can access high-quality experiences and that implementation of those programs and services is successful and sustainable.

- Create flexible mechanisms that encourage and incentivize responsiveness to local needs and learner goals.

- Include incentives for predictable accountability aligned with other federally funded education programs.

State administrative entities play multiple roles that support pathways. They align federal policy, state policy, functions, and services across other state partners as appropriate. These administrative entities set and maintain a vision for the strategic use of federal funding to ensure high-leverage, high-quality, and equity-based delivery and implementation. These entities will shape implementation and be a source of support for quality, alignment, and delivery — incentivizing stackability and transferability of credits and/or credentials, where possible.

To best serve learners, one of the key objectives for state administrative entities is providing alignment — not only of policy and services, but also for funding streams, data, performance measures, and eligibility requirements.

"We now need to do the hard work of modernizing the legislation that informs so many education policy and practice decisions to reflect the education system as it really is and not how it was in the 1960s when most of these major pieces of legislation were first enacted. No one organization can achieve that alone, and it will require a concerted and collaborative effort from the whole education policy ecosystem to achieve the wins for students that we need."

—ALEX PERRY, FORESIGHT LAW + POLICY

Implementers are the organizations or systems that coordinate services or networks of services, facilitating and supporting pathways through thoughtful development and management of structured and meaningful experiences for learners as they move toward credits and/or credentials. Implementers could be local and regional public entities and intermediaries. Examples of implementers include local schools, community college and university systems, workforce investment boards, employers, and navigation organizations such as a career placement nonprofit.

Implementers must ensure that diverse learning experiences exist in settings that have adequate resources and services provided by individuals with appropriate qualifications and consistent professional development. In addition, they must offer public accountability and provide transparency.

Service providers are the direct point of contact for learners and support those learners at all levels of a pathways ecosystem. Service providers can include educators, counselors, and nonprofit and community organization support staff who interact with learners to and through their pathways via the services and/or program offerings they provide. Service providers must be inclusive, equitable, and high-quality, with aggregate knowledge and training that encompass academic, career, and life skills development for learners. Where possible, individuals and organizations providing services should be representative of the learner populations served.

In any one community, service providers should share accountability for outcomes, building in flexibility and adaptability so that learners do not encounter wrong doors or dead ends. Learners should be able to receive services from more than one provider and move across programs and services without penalty.

Learners are the ultimate beneficiaries of proposed federal policy changes. With an ideal pathways approach, all learners will understand they are on a pathway, that they can access and choose from a mix of high-quality options, and that programs and services to support their pathway are readily available. The learner, with appropriate guidance from a qualified counselor or navigator, will choose among options that offer meaningful value (e.g., credits, credentials, and skills).

Every young person faces the the challenges and choices of transitioning to adulthood. The pathways system must work for every learner, even if they have not yet articulated or identified a need for pathways. Each will need some degree of information and navigational support; geography should not limit any learner from choosing from a range of opportunities and experiences on their pathway to adulthood.

High-Priority Policy Domains

This primer identifies five high-priority policy domains as critical to ensuring that the vision for a coherent federal policy approach meets learner and employer needs. The non-exhaustive set of domains analyzed are: 1) system alignment, 2) career development and navigation, 3) data and accountability, 4) funding, and 5) seamless transitions and navigation.

System Alignment

Alignment of systems (e.g., data, definitions, and funding) across all levels of government and educational sectors improves how stakeholders experience and support pathways. However, persistent system misalignment at the state and federal level does not support program improvement and perpetuates inequitable pathways to career success for underserved and historically marginalized learners. A prevailing lack of collaboration and alignment across state and federal policies creates misaligned goals, definitions, and metrics.

A primary example of this misalignment are the data systems for K-12, postsecondary, and workforce training. Currently, in most states, these systems are not interoperable and cannot "talk" to one another.[11] At the systems level, this lack of interoperability[12] creates an unclear picture for data users (e.g., learners, navigators, and/or service providers) of what is required to enter, persist, and succeed within particular pathways and creates operational challenges such as a need to braid funding across multiple, disparate public programs with differing goals to serve the needs of particular learners in a specific program.[13] An additional example of misalignment in this domain is the lack of a common identifier for individuals, which makes matching data records from different agencies all but impossible.[14]

To address these challenges, many states have already built state longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) which, in their ideal form, connect data across the cradle-to-career spectrum. The federal National Center for Education Statistics has a long-running grant program supporting the development of SLDSs.[15] Kentucky's SLDS connects information, including relevant pathways data, across the preschool to workforce continuum.[16] Using a strong SLDS can support learner pathways.

Alignment issues may occur in a local context as well, impacting equitable access. A lack of alignment occurs when admissions criteria in higher education cites requirements that may not be equitably accessible to some learners, such as AP courses, SAT prep, advanced math, or other coursework. The California Institute of Technology recently announced that it would remove admissions requirements for calculus, chemistry, and physics courses due to unequal access to these courses in high school, with alternative options to prove content knowledge.[17]

Likewise, pathways programs in K-12 and postsecondary systems need greater alignment to workforce needs. Some states have begun to align programming with regional data on high-demand careers and industries, but challenges exist across education and workforce federal policies. Funding sources cross several agencies

with varying requirements in state plans and use funds focused on a variety of outcomes. One approach within this domain is the development of a single or "combined" plan, generally created by joining up the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) state plans.[18] Some states have gone further by streamlining these plans to include Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and/or Individuals with Disabilities Education Act plans.[19] Doing so requires the collaboration of state-level partners at all education levels and employers, and could also create greater equitable resource allocation if guided by a common state vision and goals.

Potential Federal Policy Approach

At the federal level, policy design has not fostered collaboration across education and workforce sectors at a deep and meaningful level or focused on outcomes. Ideas to improve alignment include cross-sector collaboration of federal data systems (e.g., secondary to postsecondary, or postsecondary to workforce) and guidance to clarify the policy areas that impact each sector. Effective pathways policies must operate across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems. Reaching consensus across federal and state agencies involves hard work; simplifying bureaucratic processes, such as creating a streamlined federal common application, could ease the burden on states. As a result, state administrators would have greater opportunities to align multiple federal funding sources with state funding, targeting the state's most pressing issues in education and workforce sectors. State implementers, service providers, and learners would benefit from more focused federal resources.

"Federal pathways policy is often divorced from and slow to consider innovations happening at the state [level]. This creates a fragmented set of regulations, systems, and processes that are confusing to navigate."

—ADENIKE HUGGINS, NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

"Despite big talk around 'career pathways,' employers are largely absent from conversations and rarely thought of as potential partners in the work."

—TAYLOR WHITE, NEW AMERICA

Career Development and Navigation

High-quality career development opportunities in K-12 and postsecondary education are dependent upon foundational policy domains such as data, funding, and accountability. Policies that support career services must focus on improving program quality and equitable opportunities for every learner. Too often, learners do not have the opportunity to participate in career development and navigation because there are not enough high-quality options to permit universal access.[20] A lack of stakeholder agreement on a shared definition of "high quality" compounds the problem.[21]

In some cases, an information gap ensures that learners are not connected to opportunities that *do* exist or must learn about them through word of mouth from other learners. Many learners are limited when attending schools that do not provide these services, provide inadequate services, or fail to provide services equitably. Without well-prepared support, learners may lack access to the information they need to make choices leading to high-demand careers that employers value. Choices of value include work-based learning, CTE, and similar options leading to industry-recognized credentials.[22] Learners, particularly those in low-income communities, may not have the resources to choose options like these leading to high-wage, high-demand careers, if those opportunities exist at all within their high schools. In some cases, access is denied.[23] Other learners live in communities lacking any high-quality long-term employment opportunities.[24]

Compounding gaps in information and access are similar gaps in navigational supports and clear outcomes data required for learners to make good choices. Learners need "career navigation services [that] consist of a collection of tools and other resources designed to help people of any age make informed choices about their employment, training, and educational options."[25] This requires "a comprehensive, accessible, and connected advisement system" that engages "learners as they build occupational identities and span their lifetimes, providing coordinated support and guidance as they continue to gain skills and progress in their careers."[26] Ideally these

navigational services or programs provide indicators on the economic and career outcomes of participating learners.

Navigational supports can be human or technological. Human support comes in the form of social capital from counselors and advisers who are "trusted, informed, culturally inclusive, and unbiased."[27] Advising can come from a wide range of organizations that provide "to and through" support and materials combining human and technological tools. And technological navigation support can come through a variety of online tools, resources, apps, and videos that help with everything from choosing a school to understanding what a day in the life of a welder or a surgeon entails. States and/or districts can provide high-quality options such as in-state collaborations among K-12, postsecondary, and career success education partners;[28] third-party providers that offer pathways support focused on aptitudes[29] or personalized college, career, and life-readiness skills;[30] or dedicated state funding for dual enrollment, early college high school, CTE, and similar opportunities for every student.

Potential Federal Policy Approach

A federal policy agenda should include calling for and defining the need for career development opportunities and calling for states to support every district in providing equitable access for learners. Access that is equitable requires setting conditions that prioritize "resources for academic and career advising, helping students afford higher education" and other postsecondary training, and "providing information and guidance specifically for low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college-going students."[31] A federal solution that includes universal access to supported, high-quality career experiences would remove the barriers of equity and access that impede career exploration, development, and navigational opportunities. For example, Perkins V data can be used by states to improve equity and access.[32] Federal guidance or technical assistance might make acting upon already reported data smoother for state and district data users.

"This work is critical for us because it aligns with our organizational mission to support African Americans and other communities to achieve economic parity through education, workforce, health, housing, and justice."

—ADENIKE HUGGINS, NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

"We believe that all students deserve to be equitably connected to high-quality college and career readiness opportunities; however, there are very real barriers in place that make it difficult for historically underserved students to access high-quality opportunities compared to their peers. While many of those barriers can be addressed at the state and local level, federal policymaking and guidance must play a role to avoid further fragmentation across states and ensure states and schools equitably serve students."

—KRISTEN HENGTGEN, THE EDUCATION TRUST

Data and Accountability

Pathways stakeholders (e.g., government agencies, educational institutions, and program providers) need to systematically collect and disseminate high-quality data to inform pathways and hold systems and stakeholders accountable. Often siloed and fragmented data necessary to inform pathways makes them inaccessible, inequitable, and insufficient.[33] And these problems affect all stakeholders, not just learners. For instance, entities required to report data (e.g., state administrative agencies and service providers), often cannot access the resulting collective data.[34]

Educational institutions, states, and the federal system fall short in collecting high-quality data, providing full interoperability between systems, and holding stakeholders accountable to collect, act on, and share key data. One study found that "states described patchwork systems for aggregating data from each of the programs in order to submit a joint report."[35] Aggregating and reporting data can interfere with meeting an essential goal of publicly reported data — informing and supporting learners, as well as other stakeholders.

Accountability and performance metrics should inform pathways quality and include standards and metrics for college and career readiness, incorporating postsecondary outcomes (e.g., education, training, employment, and wages).[36] Common performance metrics and accountability definitions to support shared goals should align across ESSA, Perkins V, the Higher Education Act, and WIOA. Provisions should compel the identification and removal of barriers for learners to access and successfully attain credentials of value.[37]

Potential Federal Policy Approach

Potential federal solutions should bolster data and accountability efforts. Federal guidance outlining what constitutes "key" data is imperative, including the data points needed to track outcomes and create accountability metrics, without being so expansive as to create undue burdens. Stakeholders need to know which data to collect to inform decision-making and share information with the public, particularly to learners. Clearly articulated public reporting requirements can be designed with a focus on clarity and coherence. Finally, the systems used to collect key data must be interoperable for maximum usability, shareability, accuracy, and efficiency.
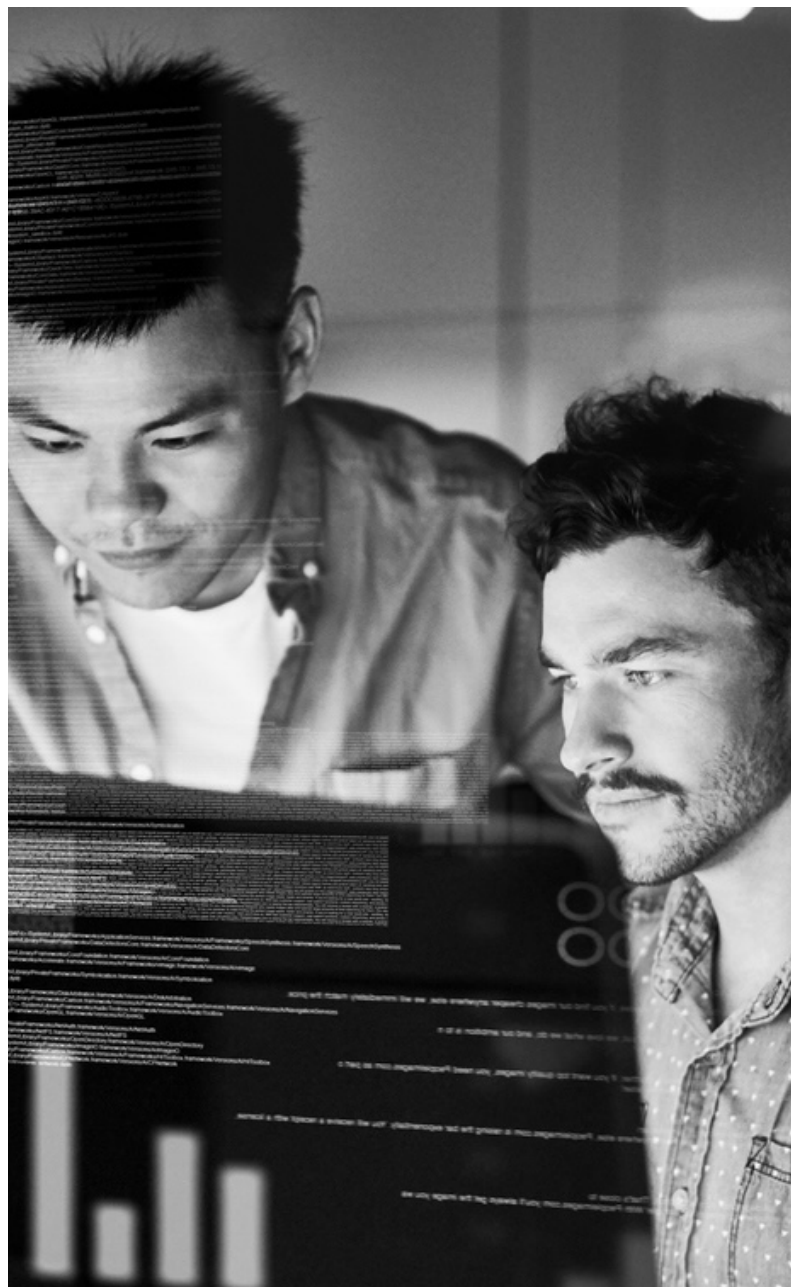
Funding

Federal policy and the funding that flows from it ensure effective, sufficient support for stakeholders who provide pathways for learners. A coherent structure is needed to support seamless learner transitions between programs and systems. The design of federal agencies and programs, however, limits cross-funded, collaborative initiatives even when they share similar goals, creating challenges for all stakeholders.[38] Further compounding the problem is the complexity of federal statutes, regulations, and agencies supporting pathways programs, creating a navigational challenge for learners and state administrative entities, implementers, and service providers.

Targeted funding and increased funding can improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged learners, but a more focused use of funds must be clear in its goals and priorities. While limited federal funding is dedicated to elements of high-quality pathways, such as work-based learning and dual enrollment, these expenses are supported primarily by state and local funds with varying levels of equitable distribution. The federal focus of funding on compliance and employment without consideration of program quality, progression into postsecondary programs, or high-skill and upwardly mobile "good jobs" results in greater inequities. For example, inequities in earnings, despite higher employment rates, persist for Black workers even after they receive WIOA services.[39]

Potential Federal Policy Approach

A more focused approach to federal policy, one that measures accountability with outcomes data, will bring more resources to bear in a more coherent way. Two areas in need of funding in this domain are supportive services, such as counseling and navigational services for learners — especially nontraditional and underserved learners — and investments of "what works," to build and track evidence for programs' impact on learners through integrated data systems.

Seamless Transitions and Navigation

There is general agreement among researchers, advocacy organizations, implementers, and service providers that for pathways programs and systems to work well for learners, the transition points should be seamless.[40] Key transition points include middle school to high school, and graduation to postsecondary training, education, or career. Yet learners often face challenges and encounter barriers while pursuing pathways, particularly at these key inflection points.[41]

There are myriad problems complicating these transitions. Unclear or misaligned policies for programs at these key transition points, combined with the lack of equitable access to advanced coursework and skill-building experiences, increase the financial burden on learners across individual transitions. The cost of choice affects learners in numerous ways, including a lack of accurate and clear information about costs and available financial aid, debt aversion, debt accumulation, and often a calamitous cost for changing directions or not completing a program or credential.[42]

Seamless transitions should preserve learners' options for high-quality skill-building opportunities aligned with employment as well as for academic credentials. Currently, available options like work-based learning, CTE, and apprenticeships often have problems of their own to overcome. For example, research has found that within high schools with "similar levels of access to advanced coursework, Black, Latino, and Indigenous students are less likely to be enrolled in advanced courses — and even when they are enrolled, they experience less success in these courses than their peers."[43] And on the workforce side, "little communication or collaboration" between schools and employers creates a barrier for potentially motivated employers who might be able to offer career information and experiences for learners.[44]

Potential Federal Policy Approach

Seamless transitions for learners should include navigational support. Increasingly learner transitions are complicated by life events, necessitating supportive on- and off-ramps. Learners experiencing transitions in their educational trajectory are also facing all the socio-emotional and physical changes that mark the transition to adulthood years. Providing every learner with access to counseling and tools that help them navigate seamless transitions can improve their outcomes.[45] A good starting point is federal guidance that encourages districts to fund and provide well-trained counselors at the ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association of no more than 250 students to one counselor.[46]

"We need to find a way to strengthen the pipeline of school counselors who are highly trained and can help students navigate the many college and career opportunities out there — and we need to rethink the way we fund these navigators, so students in underserved schools have access to the highly trained navigational supports they need and deserve."

—KRISTEN HENGTGEN, THE EDUCATION TRUST

Conclusion

The time for a stronger, more equitable, and cohesive federal policy response is now. The needs of the workforce require it. Employers, educators, community-based organizations, and postsecondary stakeholders can fuel it. Learners are eager for support in navigating pathways leading to careers aligned with their interests, aptitudes, and community needs. Federal policy and actions can lead the way. Federal policy can improve the experiences and opportunities of today's learners by helping them overcome the financial, informational, and navigational challenges they face in their educational, employment, and life journeys. It can also provide guidance, funding, and technical assistance to states to prioritize decision-making on pathways development.

Much of this work requires a stronger national vision supported by federal policy that is still to be established. Creating a coherent system, however, will continue to be a moving target. Setting a shared vision of where to go and how to potentially get there is a critical first step; operating and moving toward that vision in a coordinated fashion will be the next. Doing so will not only help learners and their families benefit, but also lead to a better prepared, more diverse, and more highly qualified workforce. ✦

"We've got a long way to go to making sure high-quality pathways are available to all of the young people in our country, but it's what our young people and adults are asking for: opportunities to live successful, happy lives."

—HORATIO BLACKMAN, NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

Methodology

A 2022 analysis found that the ecosystem of leading pathways organizations in the U.S. is fragmented and lacks cohesion in its federal policy interests and priorities, due in part to more active state-level policymaking.[47] In recent years, with minimal proactive federal pathways development, states have continued to enact and evolve pathways policies without federal guidance and support. At least one driver of this activity is that pathways leaders (e.g., advocates, state-level administrators) and those adjacent to the work doubt that federal policymaking is imminent and are instead focusing on state-level opportunities, which further perpetuates a policy cycle lacking concerted federal engagement.

In response to these questions and ecosystem challenges, Bellwether partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Joyce Foundation to engage and facilitate discussion among leaders in the field with the goal of designing a shared future vision for federal policy and action for pathways (Disclosure). Ten organizations participated:

- Advance CTE
- All4Ed
- College in High School Alliance (Foresight Law + Policy)
- The Education Trust
- Jobs for the Future
- Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies
- National Urban League
- New America
- Southeast Asia Resource Action Center
- UnidosUS

In addition, a panel of experts provided deep insight, including leaders from Career Ladders Project, CityWorks DC, Compton College, Data Quality Campaign, Education Strategy Group, Georgetown University Prisons and Justice Initiative, ideas42, Linked Learning Alliance, SchoolHouse Connection, Vermont Department of Labor, and Youth Law Center.

This primer offers a synthesis of the conclusions, agreements, and insights developed through these discussions.

Endnotes

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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit **bellwether.org**.

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