



Pathways to Implementation

Building and Sustaining Effective Career Pathways

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Vision

What Is Vision, and Why Is It Important for Career Pathways Implementation?

Effective policy implementation begins with the development of a shared vision, consisting of a set of guiding principles for decision-making and a clear idea of desired outcomes.¹ All critical stakeholders should be collaboratively engaged in developing the vision. For career pathways, this requires leadership engagement from state and local government, education, and industry.

Developing a shared vision keeps everyone on track toward the same set of goals and outcomes, ensuring a smoother path through other implementation steps.² The process of vision development brings all stakeholders to the table; the shared vision they develop guides program design, resource allocation, and ongoing communications efforts.

State leaders and national experts identified the following as core characteristics of a state-level vision for career pathways initiatives:

- **Prioritizes collaborative development:** While a state's vision for career pathways may begin with a single state leader (i.e., the governor or the state superintendent), it should be developed in a collaborative process that allows for critical stakeholders to offer their perspectives.³ This

SERIES OVERVIEW

As the needs of the U.S. workforce change, states have sought to improve educational and career outcomes for students by investing in the development of career pathways.⁴ Career pathways programs allow high school students to access postsecondary education and employment opportunities, work-based learning experiences, skill-building in alignment with academic content and high-demand occupations, and opportunities to earn credentials before graduation.⁵

To effectively change students' experiences and outcomes, strong policy must be coupled with robust implementation. In [Pathways to Implementation](#), Bellwether draws on nearly 40 interviews with leaders and experts across 14 states to highlight innovative strategies and effective models in career pathways policy, implementation, and programming, as well as challenges states encounter in this work. The series is organized thematically into seven briefs, each addressing one of the key elements of Bellwether's framework for career pathways policy implementation:

1. Vision
2. Design
3. Stakeholder Engagement
4. Resources
5. Communications
6. Data
7. Continuous Improvement

Each brief defines the key framework element, articulates common challenges to state implementation, provides examples of successful state action, and concludes with considerations for state leaders and policymakers.

process helps to establish a unified orientation to program goals, facilitate coalition-building to navigate policymaking processes, and serve as a point of realignment as implementation progresses.

- **Builds shared ownership:** Ownership of the state’s vision for career pathways should be shared across government agencies, education systems, and business/industry leadership and include champions in each engaged sector. This allows for continuity and sustainability of the pathways initiative and its implementation across changes in leadership within various stakeholder groups.⁶
- **Aligns to education systems and labor markets:** The content of the state’s vision for career pathways should be aligned with the structure of its education systems, a definition of student success, postsecondary and workforce opportunities, and state workforce and labor market needs.⁷ This ensures that the pathways being developed are relevant and responsive to student needs for employment and further education, as well as supportive of state needs for economic development.

Developing a shared vision keeps everyone on track toward the same set of goals and outcomes, ensuring a smoother path through downstream implementation steps.

What Gets in the Way of Vision, and How Are States Making It Work?

While developing and maintaining a clear, coherent, shared vision for career pathways can be the key to guiding and sustaining effective implementation, it takes dedication, work, and attention from all engaged stakeholders — and a lot can get in the way. State leaders and national experts elevated the following common challenges to developing and maintaining a shared statewide vision for career pathways:

- **Lack of shared vision across state agencies:** If an initiative is led or championed individually by the governor, the state educational agency, or the state department of labor — but that vision is not shared across agencies — it can be challenging to build momentum for implementation.
- **Lack of leadership and disruptions in leadership:** Political cycles often result in leadership changes. When these changes occur in government positions that are critical to creating and sustaining an initiative, it can result in a loss of momentum.
- **Lack of an explicit governance structure:** If stakeholders are unclear about which agency or individual is responsible for each part of rollout, it can lead to uneven rollout across the state.
- **Lack of champions among implementers and beneficiaries:** Implementation can be stymied when the leadership that drives the initiative fails to effectively engage educators, counselors, parents, and students.

While these challenges are common across states, leaders and stakeholders in **Indiana**, **Massachusetts**, and **Tennessee** have successfully developed processes to build and/or maintain a shared vision for career pathways.

Indiana



Guided by Core Principles

Indiana’s vision for career pathways centers on building options that allow students to earn valuable credentials and engage in work-based learning experiences while still in high school. In 2023, legislators and policymakers codified this vision in the passage of House Bill 1002. The law supports career awareness and exploration in the state’s high schools, and the creation of the iLab, a coalition of business leaders working to develop a statewide youth apprenticeship system.⁸ The state was spurred to action by the 2016 publication “No Time to Lose,” a seminal report from the National Conference of State Legislatures that included Switzerland as a model system for its strong career and technical education programs and ties to industry.⁹

Several core principles **developed and shared across government, education, and business** have guided Indiana’s work in career pathways. They include a commitment to keeping the work student-centered, the importance of transparency, and the creation of a system that is nimble and permeable. (By “permeable,” state leaders mean a structure that allows students to easily move in and out of any given pathway without losing credit for prior learning.) In 2019, a planning group across sectors, including industry, higher education, government, nonprofit, and K-12 education, came together to solidify these core principles, originally set forth by Gov. Eric Holcomb. While Indiana is early in its pathways work, the adherence to these principles across stakeholders, balanced with a willingness to test out new, innovative ideas, is paving the way for the state’s progress in pathways implementation and improving student outcomes.

State leaders credit the ability to get buy-in for these principles as having the “right leaders at the right time.” David Buyze, director of policy and special programs at the Indiana Department of Education, explained, “It’s really the **stakeholder alignment** that has occurred in the last two to three years that has been able to make [progress on pathways] possible in our state. The legislature is pulling in the same direction as the executive branch agencies. The community partners and business community are all very aligned.” Indiana took advantage of alignment across state agencies to create a shared vision — one set forth by an engaged, strong leader and refined and executed by a range of stakeholders.

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—DAVID BUYZE, DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND SPECIAL PROGRAMS, INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Built on a Successful Model

Indiana has learned from best practices in Switzerland. The “No Time to Lose” report focused on the permeability of the Swiss system as a real strength, a quality that resonated with Indiana leaders and stakeholders.¹⁰ To ensure that a wide range of stakeholders are exposed to Switzerland’s system, the state, along with its key partner, the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, hosts trips to Switzerland for

people **from across state agencies, business, and education**. These trips created buy-in for the shared vision and core set of principles initially put forward by the state through conversations and trainings hosted at the Center on the Economics and Management of Education and Training Systems.¹¹

Nearly 300 people have participated in these trips as of mid-2024. Each trip focuses on one specific industry (e.g., manufacturing or health care, among others) so that leaders from the same industry can learn from the systems in Switzerland and then strategize together on how to best apply those learnings to their own trade. But trip participants are not just business leaders. Groups are designed to be cross-sector, including state government representatives, school leaders, mayors, college leaders, and more, so that there is a systems-level understanding of what changes need to be made. These trips are a learning opportunity and an organizing tool. As Buyze noted, “Seeing firsthand the work that is happening for students in Switzerland has been the biggest thing for taking skeptics and turning them into people buying into the vision.”

Supported by an Intermediary

These Switzerland trips also underscore the importance of an intermediary, like the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, which supported the learning excursion to Switzerland and helped convene stakeholders across sectors. President and CEO Claire Fiddian-Green noted that the foundation can provide resources to create these opportunities that would otherwise be “hard for other entities to fund.” By leveraging the expertise, resources, and connections of an intermediary, Indiana can support a range of critical stakeholders in translating the learnings from Switzerland into an actionable vision for the state.

Massachusetts



Shared Across Agencies

The success of Massachusetts’ career pathways work lies in a shared vision **collaboratively developed with the input of many stakeholders**. This structure allows for a diffusion of responsibility across multiple state agencies, lending itself to sustainability over time. Jim Peyser, the former secretary of education for the commonwealth, explained the reasoning behind the diffusion of the vision and responsibilities: “You have to have an institutional structure within the executive branch to ensure that people are not only talking to each other but [also] have some **shared responsibility or mutual accountability for one another across otherwise siloed agencies**. ... This work cannot be done by a single agency” (Disclosure).

Importantly, the sharing of vision and responsibility did not end after the initial vision creation. Through ongoing meetings among the core group of stakeholders and state agencies — including the Massachusetts Departments of Education, Labor, and Workforce and Economic Development — that vision has been refined and carried forward through pathways implementation.

Developed in Partnership With Employers

Because industry is at the table from the beginning and in regular conversations throughout, Massachusetts’ vision **is aligned with workforce needs** in the state. State leaders emphasized that career pathways will not work without industry at the table during the visioning process. The state engaged employers from the beginning, working with industry through the Regional Workforce Skills Planning Initiative, a cross-sector group

tasked by the governor with addressing the skills gap.¹² The collaborations made possible by this initiative led to the creation of seven regional blueprints that guide the state’s work on career pathways. Employers’ involvement in setting the state vision also informed the design of career pathways programming.¹³ For example, every Innovation Pathway in Massachusetts must have at least one employer as part of the team who can provide input and ensure alignment with labor market needs.¹⁴

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—JIM PEYSER, FORMER SECRETARY OF EDUCATION, MASSACHUSETTS

Tennessee



Built on Shared Language

Tennessee cemented its role in national conversations about career pathways during the era of the “Drive to 55” initiative, aimed at getting 55% of Tennesseans to a college degree or certificate by 2025.¹⁵ Gov. Bill Haslam created the Drive to 55 initiative in 2013, which set a straightforward, challenging goal for the state **aligned to education and workforce development needs** — a goal around which state agencies could rally and coordinate efforts. Jerre Maynor Jr., the former senior director of career pathways at the Tennessee Department of Education, shared, “The Drive to 55 was simple enough that everyone understood it, and the economic focus was something that had broad political support. It gave each agency some shared language. It allowed you to start connecting things that were not as formal as shared budgets but that were seeking the same outcomes, and you could really work together around that.” The simple language was easy for agencies and stakeholders to adopt and use in everyday meetings, communications, and policies, which helped advance Tennessee’s vision.

Communicated Through Nonpartisan Messaging

The vision behind Drive to 55 was nonpartisan and communicated in a way that brought people along from both sides of the political aisle. Messaging centered around economic success for the state and economic mobility for individuals, allowing people from different backgrounds and ideologies to fully support the vision. This was especially critical in a state with both predominantly Democratic metro centers (e.g., Memphis) and expansive, heavily Republican rural regions.

The nonpartisan messaging drove public support. In 2014, 86% of Tennessee voters said they approved of the Tennessee Promise Program, a cornerstone of Drive to 55.¹⁶ Gov. Haslam, a Republican widely known for the Drive to 55 initiative, saw significant bipartisan approval for his work on education in the state.¹⁷ By never tying the vision to a single political party, state leaders ensured that **a broad set of constituents and stakeholders** were willing to carry the work forward.

“The Drive to 55 was simple enough that everyone understood it, and the economic focus was something that had broad political support. It gave each agency some shared language.”

—JERRE MAYNOR JR., FORMER SENIOR DIRECTOR OF CAREER PATHWAYS, TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Translated Into Shared, Collaborative Work

Tennessee’s collaboratively developed vision translated to shared work. For example, state agencies worked together to ensure that separate funding streams were used effectively to coordinate and amplify Drive to 55’s impact. One interviewee noted that the Tennessee Department of Labor often struggled to spend its federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding targeted at out-of-school youth. Rather than sending that money back to the federal government, the state’s Department of Labor partnered with its Department of Education to apply for a waiver to allow some of the WIOA funds to be used for in-school youth and in service of the Drive to 55 initiative.¹⁸

Tennessee agencies also formed **interagency data-sharing agreements** to accelerate understanding of impact and outcomes. To supercharge the work around data, multiple state agencies, including the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and the Tennessee Department of Education, partnered to apply for an Institute of Education Sciences Longitudinal Data Systems grant.¹⁹ Given the centrality of a longitudinal data system to career pathways work, this collaboration helped advance Tennessee’s vision.

Vision: Considerations for State Leaders and Policymakers

In developing a shared **vision** for career pathways implementation, state leaders and policymakers should consider the following critical questions.

Collaboration — How will you ...

- Engage key stakeholders, including K-12, postsecondary, and business/industry, in a collaborative process to develop shared goals for career pathways?
- Ensure that engaged stakeholders are representative of regional variations in opportunity and employment needs?
- Engage credible initial and enduring conveners of these stakeholders in this work?

Policy Landscape — How will you ...

- Analyze existing career pathways policies to ensure new initiatives are non-duplicative and leverage existing structures and funding streams?

Incentives — How will you ...

- Establish coherent, systemwide incentives that support all stakeholders in working toward the shared goal?

Accountability — How will you ...

- Clearly articulate, and communicate to all stakeholders, the governance structures and leadership responsibilities for the program?
- Clearly articulate, set metrics for, and collect data to track the expected student outcomes of the program?
- Establish performance benchmarks or requirements as well as corresponding improvement structures to support implementers to meet them?
- Require periodic consideration of outcomes data to determine potential adjustments?

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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ABOUT THE SERIES

Pathways to Implementation highlights innovative strategies and effective models in career pathways policy, implementation, and programming, as well as challenges states encounter in this work. This seven-part series addresses the key elements of Bellwether's framework for career pathways policy implementation.

DISCLOSURE

Bellwether works with organizations and leaders who share our viewpoint-diverse commitment to improving education and advancing equity for all young people — regardless of identity, circumstance, or background. As part of our commitment to transparency, Jim Peyser is a senior adviser at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. He participated in the *Pathways to Implementation* series as an interview subject *solely* in his capacity as the former Massachusetts Secretary of Education from 2015 to 2022.

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