



# Pathways to Implementation

Building and Sustaining Effective Career Pathways

By Christine Dickason, Sharmila Mann, and Nick Lee

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## Stakeholder Engagement

### What Is Stakeholder Engagement, and Why Is It Important for Career Pathways Implementation?

Stakeholder engagement, a process through which all relevant groups are brought into and continuously engaged in the work, is critical to effective policy implementation.<sup>1</sup> It builds buy-in for program enactment and sustainability, allows for collaborative decision-making, and enables everyone critical to the success of the program to have a stake in the game. Engaging stakeholders early and often ensures that all are represented in developing a shared vision, designing and implementing a feasible program, and achieving stated goals.<sup>2</sup>

For career pathways, engaged groups must represent those who will develop, enact, and administer the program — including state government officials (governor, legislature, state agencies of education, workforce, and labor), business and industry leaders, and secondary and postsecondary leaders and educators — as well as the students and families who will participate in and benefit from the program.<sup>3</sup>

#### 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.

**State leaders and national experts identified the following as core characteristics of a strong stakeholder engagement strategy for career pathways initiatives:**

- **Engages employers:** Business and industry leaders understand the state’s workforce needs, have a strong sense of the skills required in the workplace, and are the ones who will be hiring students coming through career pathways. These partnerships are critical for articulating the skills required in high-skill, high-demand jobs and for developing aligned work-based learning opportunities for students.<sup>6</sup>
- **Engages postsecondary leaders:** Postsecondary leaders, particularly in two-year institutions of higher education, can build local connections among high schools, higher education, and employers to ensure that career pathways lead to academic credentials with currency in the labor market.<sup>7</sup> These partnerships are critical for translating the skills articulated by employers into an academic context, conferring academic credits and credentials to students, and for communicating the value of pathways to employers and high school educators, counselors, and students.
- **Engages students and families:** The success of career pathways initiatives requires that students and families understand — and agree with — the value that those pathways can provide.<sup>8</sup> Engaging students and families early in the development process builds an early understanding of the purpose and benefits of pathways, provides them with a voice in determining which pathways are prioritized, and allows them to identify the structural supports required to enable participation in pathways programs.<sup>9</sup>
- **Builds cross-agency linkages:** Moving out of siloed government agencies (in K-12, higher education, and workforce development) to build cross-agency teams ensures that all voices are heard and addressed during career pathways development and implementation.<sup>10</sup> Cross-agency engagement can maximize resources, support consistent

communications to parents and students, facilitate data-sharing and analysis, and provide an avenue for sustainability when the state experiences leadership changes in specific agencies.

- **Leverages intermediaries:** Intermediaries (regional agencies, community organizations, and other nongovernmental partners) can bring together all relevant stakeholders as a neutral party and foster cross-constituency conversations to support implementation.<sup>11</sup> Intermediaries can also provide human capital support for sustaining employer engagement, leading continuing communications efforts, and ensuring sustainability of career pathways initiatives amid changes in political leadership.<sup>12</sup>

## **What Gets in the Way of Stakeholder Engagement, and How Are States Making It Work?**

Sustained, meaningful relationships across stakeholder groups support the implementation of career pathways that are both valuable to educators and employers and appealing to students and families. Yet developing these relationships can be challenging, as states must be willing to invest significant front-end time and resources to reach stakeholders and secure their commitment to the initiative. State leaders and national experts elevated the following common challenges to effective stakeholder engagement for career pathways initiatives:

- **Lack of engagement with employers:** Employers are often absent from policy development and implementation conversations, which hinders the alignment of career pathways programs to workforce needs and creates uncertainties about the value of the career pathway in the labor market.
- **Lack of value proposition for employers:** It can be challenging for states to incentivize employers to engage in the development and delivery of career

pathways programs unless they see a clear benefit from what appears to be a significant up-front investment in time and people.

- **Lack of alignment across stakeholders on vision and design:** If leaders do not engage all relevant stakeholders or ensure that all feel that they have collaboratively contributed to creating a shared vision and developing an effective program design, buy-in will be weak and implementation will be uneven.
- **Lack of engagement with teachers, students, and families:** As teachers, parents, and students are the implementers and beneficiaries of the new career pathways programs, their engagement is critical. Without their voices at the table and consideration of their needs, both program implementation and uptake will face major challenges.

While these challenges are common across states, leaders in **Delaware, Massachusetts, Ohio,** and **Tennessee** have successfully developed strategies for effective stakeholder engagement in the implementation of their career pathways programs.

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## Delaware



### Invested in Deep Relationships

In Delaware, leaders emphasize the importance of **building and maintaining relationships with a variety of stakeholders** — all of which build value for students. For example, Jonathan Wickert, director of career and technical education (CTE) and STEM initiatives at the Delaware Department of Education, explained that they have a long-standing, mutually beneficial partnership with DuPont, which has led to student field trips and work-based learning experiences while also providing the company with a pool of future workers.

Wickert emphasized that relationships are at the core of what they do. He explained, “It’s actually the relationship piece that gets this work done. ... The second trust breaks down, you’re done. ... We really see that as a value within our office, and so we go out of our way to try to maintain relationships, even people that are way outside of the focus of CTE, because we know there’s a connection somewhere we just haven’t found yet.” **Engaging employers** over the span of many years can establish clear lines of trust and help forge partnerships that improve pathways for students, communities, and industry.

### Built Bridges to Employers

Business leaders are interested in engaging with schools and students, especially when they see opportunities to strengthen their own talent pipeline or engage in corporate responsibility, but they often do not know how or when to engage. In Delaware, **state offices serve as intermediaries and connectors between employers and schools**, ensuring that the two groups build bridges and overcome existing barriers to engagement. Wickert said, “For every employer

that passes through our office and we think they'd be valuable to our students, we'll retain their contact information and lean into them for that sort of support, and for program committees to make adjustments to the program." This creates clear opportunities for businesses to engage in everything from overall vision development to program and curricula design to communications efforts.

Joanna Barnekov-Staib, executive director of the Delaware Workforce Development Board, offered an example of how the state creates opportunities for businesses to engage in pathways programming. She noted that the state approved \$26,000 in funding for a program for seniors at a high school to attend a local college to get their Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) degree. Importantly, these seniors will benefit from local business partnerships that will allow them to participate in work-based learning in the spring semester of their senior year, meaning they will graduate from high school with at least six months of career-aligned work experience.

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—JONATHAN WICKERT, DIRECTOR OF CTE AND STEM INITIATIVES, DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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## Massachusetts



### Established Cross-Sector, High Visibility Coalitions

Massachusetts has long relied on coalitions built across sectors to inform policy. Created by former Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker and continued by current Gov. Maura Healey, the Massachusetts Workforce Skills Cabinet **brings together state agencies and outside-of-government stakeholders** to design career pathways policies.<sup>13</sup> Coalitions outside the government exist, too, as highlighted by Ed Lambert, executive director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance. He explained, "We've created a coalition of 16 organizations intentionally designed to include both business-led organizations and either education policy or youth-serving social justice organizations, so that we can have a common agenda with all of those folks. We think business voices can be enhanced when those voices are sung in the same chorus as non-business organizations." Central to these conversations, said Lambert, are discussions around equity of access to pathways opportunities for all students in the state.

### Engaged Students and Families

When thinking about stakeholders, leaders in Massachusetts look beyond businesses, community organizations, and education entities to the recipients of these pathways' offerings; they specifically look to **engage students and their families**.<sup>14</sup> The engagement with students and families pays off for the state. Growing support for programming on the ground and with the public creates stability that lasts beyond changes in state leadership.

Students and families voicing their support for pathways programming have a real impact on how the state government and key stakeholders prioritize this work.

Chessye Moseley, deputy director for the Massachusetts Alliance for Early College, explained, “Part of what has helped sustain this work are the vocal leaders on the ground who see the difference that this makes for kids, and their ability to raise up those stories and be in front and say, ‘This is the difference, not only for students, but also for families, for communities, the economy and workforce, and for the commonwealth itself.’ It is people being able to really see the tangible impact, and therefore keeping us on the priority list as something that’s working.” Remembering the power of community support for these programs has ensured that Massachusetts remains a leader in the pathways space.

### Developed Strong Intermediaries

Bringing together stakeholders from across sectors — a requirement for strong career pathways — can be challenging. Stakeholders come to the table with different expectations, norms around language, and goals. That’s where **intermediaries can play a pivotal role as translators and convenors**, particularly across systems that do not regularly engage with each other and often do not speak the same language of practice. Lambert pointed to Boston’s Private Industry Council as an example of how intermediaries can serve as translators between industry and education.<sup>15</sup> Lambert said, “Where it works best is where there’s an intermediary ... where they serve as the interpreter for businesses with regard to how to speak to schools, how to make engagements more uniform and easier for businesses.” Rather than leaving educators and businesses struggling to understand each other, a strong intermediary can cut through the noise and confusion, simplifying engagement for all involved parties.

## Ohio



### Created Pathways With and for Business

Ohio structures its career pathways with business partners and **in response to business needs**. One of the most prominent examples is its ongoing work to build stronger career pathways around the semiconductor industry to produce a talent pipeline for Intel, which announced a \$20 billion investment in two new factories in the state in 2022.<sup>16</sup> Recognizing that the investment would create demand for industry workers, the state government began to map out what was needed to produce that talent. First, several agencies, including the Department of Higher Education and the Department of Education and Workforce, collaborated with Intel to identify missing elements in existing curricula based on the skills needed to gain a job as an entry-level technician at the company. With those gaps identified, the state developed a new certificate program and is currently working on creating a new Career-Technical Assurance Guide (CTAG) around the skills needed to be employed at Intel.<sup>17</sup> (CTAGs are Ohio’s industry-specific guides that identify high school career and technical education courses guaranteed to earn college credit.) The state is now replicating this approach for other industries, such as auto and advanced mobility.<sup>18</sup>

# Tennessee



## Informed by Business and Educator Input

Tennessee’s “Drive to 55” initiative — the state’s goal to have 55 percent of Tennesseans with a college degree or certificate by 2025 — mobilized massive investments and engagements on pathways. The initiative was born from what Gov. Bill Haslam and his team learned in his statewide listening tour with business leaders and educators.<sup>19</sup>

Samantha Gutter, who previously worked in Haslam’s office as well as at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, reflected on the importance of that listening tour: “Gov. Haslam went across the state and engaged business leaders to see, ‘what do you need to expand in Tennessee and expand the workforce? What are the key ingredients that you need in the state?’ Those conversations really turned to education. ... And then there was engagement with K-12 educators. We heard that students were underprepared. So, there was just a lot of convergence during that time on needing to improve our education system. [Those conversations with business leaders and educators] truly informed the 55% goal at the time.”

Gov. Haslam and his administration’s willingness to not only listen to **a wide range of stakeholders from across the state**, but also use those learnings to directly inform policy, led to deeper buy-in, as stakeholders could see their own needs and voices reflected in the state’s vision and planning.

## Built Robust Ecosystem of Partners Across the State

Tennessee’s career pathways programs are boosted by an ecosystem of partner organizations and stakeholders across the state. The original Tennessee Pathways program built out regional steering committees to gain buy-in from locals and ensure the pathways were informed by local market needs.<sup>20</sup> The regional steering committees included at least one employer partner as well as local K-12 and higher education leaders.

Regional partners in three distinct regions of the state are especially helpful for translating state-level policies into context-relevant programs, a critical function of intermediaries. For example, local partners in West Tennessee are doing extensive work on the ground to build out work-based learning experiences and applicable credentials for students living near BlueOval City, the new Ford Motor Company mega-campus focused on building electric vehicles.<sup>21</sup> **With the help of its intermediaries**, educators and employers on the ground can better understand where state policy allows for resources and support to get new career pathways off the ground and improve existing ones in Tennessee.

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*“There was just a lot of convergence during that time on needing to improve our education system. [Those conversations with business leaders and educators] truly informed the 55% goal.”*

—SAMANTHA GUTTER, FORMER EDUCATION POLICY ADVISOR FOR GOV. HASLAM, TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

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# Stakeholder Engagement: Considerations for State Leaders and Policymakers

In developing a strategy for career pathways **stakeholder engagement**, state leaders and policymakers should consider the following critical questions:

## **Employers — How will you ...**

- Identify and engage employers from relevant industries?
- Ask employers to engage in program design?
- Encourage employers to express barriers to their deeper engagement and ideas about how those barriers could be lowered?
- Ask employers to commit to hiring students who complete pathways, or articulate what would be needed to ensure they do so?

## **Secondary Education — How will you ...**

- Engage secondary school leaders, educators, and staff and deliberately bring them into the design process?
- Support secondary school leaders, educators, and staff in their efforts to offer programs within high schools?

## **Postsecondary Education — How will you ...**

- Engage postsecondary leaders, educators, and staff and ensure they are bought into the program?
- Ask postsecondary leaders, educators, and staff to ensure alignment of career pathways programs with postsecondary pathways?

## **Government Agencies — How will you ...**

- Engage all relevant sectors and agencies at the state level (governor, legislature, and education/labor/workforce agencies)?
- Ensure state-level engagement includes both appointed leadership and career-level staff to facilitate continuity over changes in political leadership?

## **Students and Families — How will you ...**

- Engage students and families in the development, implementation, and continuous improvement of the state's career pathways initiatives?
- Reflect the needs, requests, and constraints of students and families in the design and implementation of career pathways?

### ***Advocacy Organizations — How will you ...***

- Identify local and state-level organizations focused on advancing and improving career pathways programming and policy?
- Identify how those organizations have articulated the need for state-level policy improvements, and learn how these requests have been received by local and state-level policymakers?
- Engage and activate these organizations in policy development, implementation, and improvement processes?

### ***Intermediaries — How will you ...***

- Identify organizations in the state that could serve as independent conveners of all stakeholder groups?
- Engage these organizations to support both continuous stakeholder engagement and sustainability of career pathways initiatives?

### ***Missing Stakeholders — How will you ...***

- Identify which of these stakeholder groups have been missing from the conversations?
- Work to regularly engage these groups throughout the implementation process?

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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](http://bellwether.org).

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## ABOUT THE SERIES

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