



# Pathways to Implementation

Building and Sustaining Effective Career Pathways

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## Resources

### What Are Resources, and Why Are They Important for Career Pathways Implementation?

Effective policy implementation requires access to adequate resources: enough available funding and human capital to establish, sustain, and continuously improve initiatives with fidelity to the shared vision. For career pathways, this means access to sustainable financial resources to support program activities, as well as access to robust human capital — at state agencies, businesses, districts, and schools — to effectively implement programs, support student access, and ensure student persistence through pathways.<sup>1</sup>

**State leaders and national experts identified the following as core characteristics of an adequate resourcing strategy for career pathways initiatives:**

- **Braids funding sources:** Individual state agencies (education, workforce, and labor) have access to different funding streams that may not be adequate on their own to fully support pathways initiatives. Pulling together resources from federal (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [WIOA] and Perkins), state (education and workforce development funds), and local sources across agencies can create larger pools of funding from more sources — lessening the risk that fluctuations in any individual funding stream will spell disaster.<sup>2</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>3</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>4</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.

- **Invests in human capital at state agencies:** State agencies often operate on a lean staffing structure, making it difficult to take on new initiatives effectively.<sup>5</sup> Bolstering capacity at state agencies central to the work, such as departments of K-12 and postsecondary education as well as workforce/labor, can allow those staff to dedicate capacity to developing and sustaining career pathways initiatives. This can involve increasing the number of agency staff and/or garnering additional support for existing staff, such as consultants or technical assistance providers.
- **Builds capacity in schools and districts:** Already overstretched district leaders, K-12 educators, and counselors will be doing the work on the ground for career pathways implementation. They need support in terms of staffing capacity, professional development, and connections to postsecondary and business partners. State leaders can address these needs directly, work through regional district support structures to provide assistance, and/or engage intermediaries to manage local technical assistance needs.
- **Ensures students are supported:** To effectively engage in and persist through career pathways, students need financial support to access courses and continue their education into postsecondary institutions, human resource support for navigation and advising around pathways, and flexibility in how they access these supports so they can go at their own pace.<sup>6</sup> State leaders can address these needs through district funding formula weights for students participating in career pathways, direct allocations to pathways implementation efforts, or by establishing dedicated funding streams to meet specific needs (for instance, increasing the number of school counselors available to support pathways).<sup>7</sup>
- **Leverages philanthropic interest:** Foundations and national organizations have launched various initiatives to support the development and implementation of state career pathways.<sup>8</sup> States

that have been engaged in national initiatives on career pathways and are making progress may be able to secure philanthropic support to address unmet needs (e.g., developing standards, strategic planning, and joint learning) and augment their efforts to pilot and/or scale. Philanthropic support can augment human capital as well, as engagement in these initiatives provides state leaders opportunities to connect with like-minded peers to share strategies and collectively problem-solve around common challenges.

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

Implementation of career pathways is contingent upon the ability of state leaders to establish and maintain a strong financial base to support the initiative as well as adequate human capacity in terms of staffing at state agencies, districts, and schools, yet these resources are often stretched thin. State leaders and national experts described the following common challenges to developing and maintaining adequate resources for career pathways:

- **Limited base of financial resources:** States, districts, schools, and postsecondary institutions have limited financial resources and must choose among multiple priorities; without dedicated funding streams from state budgets, foundations, or other organizations, implementation is difficult if not impossible.
- **Instability in funding:** Career pathways programs are sometimes developed using funds from a one-time allocation from the state and/or foundation grant, leaving districts and schools to solve for sustainability. Even when there is a dedicated state funding stream, budgeting decisions can result in funding fluctuations, jeopardizing the program's sustainability.

- **Lack of human capital/capacity:** State agencies, districts, and high schools have limited staff capacity and may be unable to develop and implement career pathways initiatives on their own.
- **Lack of intermediaries:** While intermediary organizations can provide critical support functions, such as connecting and convening stakeholders, maintaining momentum through changes in political leadership, seeking funding support, and providing short-term staffing capacity, these types of organizations are not available in every state.

While these challenges are common across states, leaders and stakeholders in **Delaware, Ohio, Texas,** and **Washington** have successfully developed processes to establish and maintain adequate resources for career pathways.

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## Delaware



### Developed State-Level Funding Opportunities

The strategy of **braiding funding** from a variety of sources — state, federal, and private — has helped Delaware make significant progress in building effective career pathways.<sup>9</sup> Braiding funding was possible due to a shared vision developed across key stakeholders, allowing state-level agencies, such as the Department of Education, to pursue grants strategically and then share that money to direct it where it was needed most.

Joanna Barnekov-Staib, executive director of the Delaware Workforce Development Board, noted that the board is working to map out available statewide funding sources to better guide businesses that have questions about applying for career pathways program funds. She emphasized the importance of sharing examples of individual teachers or businesses who successfully sought funds from the state so others seeking support would be aware of existing opportunities.

### Aligned Funds Along a Pathway

Delaware leaders recognize the need to ensure funds flow continuously along a pathway so that learners do not reach a dead end where resources stop. Rachel Turney, deputy secretary at the Delaware Department of Labor, noted that policymakers aimed to be strategic in **aligning resources so that students could continue to move smoothly** along a pathway. She said, “We rewrote policy so that if you already participated in a school youth program, for example, then you are automatically eligible for a voucher ... to pay for your next level of education or training.” Delaware leaders were intent on ensuring that students received equitable credit for prior learning and had the necessary resources to continue to the next level of education if they so desired.

## Reserved Funds for Innovation

Delaware system leaders understand the importance of equipping career and technical education (CTE) programs — a critical piece of the state’s pathways ecosystem — with enough funding to not only maintain existing programs but also innovate and improve upon what they already have. CTE programs often require expensive capital improvement upgrades or investments in new technology. To address this need, the state **uses its Perkins reserve fund to specifically support innovation in CTE programs**. Jonathan Wickert, director of CTE and and STEM initiatives at the Delaware Department of Education, explained, “We make funds available, through the secondary reserve for innovation, to update programs or to pick up those more expensive costs that they might need to invest in, like a capital improvement or equipment update.” These funds allow programs to modernize, innovate, and provide up-to-date curriculum and materials for students that are aligned with labor market realities, especially in fast-changing fields.

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

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## Ohio



### Built Robust, State-Level Funding Programs

Ohio has launched several funding initiatives that emphasize its commitment to work-based learning and strengthening career pathways programming. For example, the Regionally Aligned Priorities in Delivering Skills (RAPIDS) program, created by the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE), is a grant program designed to invest in capital resources, such as new equipment needed to train learners in a specific field.<sup>10</sup> The newer Super RAPIDS program builds on the success of RAPIDS by broadening the range of eligible projects to include strategic initiatives focused on **building capacity at the local level**.<sup>11</sup> Cheryl Rice, vice chancellor of Higher Education Workforce Alignment at ODHE, noted that some of the Super RAPIDS funding is being used to invest in human capital and talent — both often overlooked but critical resources for career pathways. RAPIDS and Super RAPIDS require grant recipients to have strong connections with businesses to ensure the investments are workforce-aligned.

Ohio also provides resources to **ensure students are supported**. For example, the Talent Ready Grant Program<sup>12</sup> provides learners with funding to complete a workforce credential or certificate program at an Ohio Technical Center. Ohio also offers the Choose Ohio First Scholarship Program,<sup>13</sup> which provides funding for students pursuing a degree in STEM fields.

## Texas



### Provided Funding Incentives to Both K-12 and Higher Education

In 2023, the Texas Legislature approved House Bill 8, a massive investment in the state's community colleges via a new outcomes-based funding approach.<sup>14</sup> According to John Hryhorchuk, senior vice president of policy and advocacy at the nonprofit think tank Texas 2036, that new infusion of funds represents “transformational economic mobility policy ... for the nation's largest growing economy.” House Bill 8 complements legislation from 2019 that allotted new outcomes-based funding to high schools based on students' preparedness for college, career, or the military.<sup>15</sup> During the 2019-20 school year (SY), the state paid more than \$240 million in outcomes bonuses to districts across Texas.

Together, the new outcomes bonuses for high schools and community colleges invest in key components of the state's pathways programming. The funding for community colleges supports the expansion of dual enrollment programs, while the outcomes bonuses for high schools incentivize credentials of value that students earn. High schools engaged in career pathways programming can also access and **combine multiple incentive-based funding streams**. As Hryhorchuk explained, “Under current law, leveraging both the 2019 high school and the 2023 community college outcomes bonuses, you can get an up to \$15,000-per-student bonus for the same action through multiple different funding formulas.” This significant funding is intended to motivate districts to invest in pathways programming.

## Washington



### Developed Braided, Innovative Funding Opportunities

Washington has refined a framework for funding career pathways that continues to benefit the entire state. Career Connect Washington (CCW) Program Builders is a grant program that funds intermediaries who bridge the gap between education and industry to ensure students can explore career pathways, earn valuable training needed for the workforce, and engage in work-based learning.<sup>16</sup> **The grant program uses several funding sources to operate**, leveraging federal funding from WIOA and private funding from JPMorganChase and local private funds. The scale of the program is large — nearly 16,000 students were enrolled in Career Launch programs through CCW in SY22-23.

The statewide infrastructure built by CCW has led to more funding opportunities for the state. Kimberly Hetrick, director of CCW at the Washington Student Achievement Council, shared that Washington received a Good Jobs Challenge grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration due to the success of the CCW Program Builders framework.<sup>17</sup> She explained, “With the Career Connect Washington infrastructure already in place and seeing success, Washington was well positioned for the \$25 million Good Jobs Challenge grant. We have leveraged the CCW framework in other federal grants to support workforce needs and we expect that it will lead to additional federal funding.”

# Resources: Considerations for State Leaders and Policymakers

As they seek to establish adequate **resources** for career pathways implementation, state agency leaders and policymakers should consider the following critical questions:

## **Funding Strategies — How will you ...**

- Develop funding strategies to establish initial implementation support, and ensure continued support, for pathways initiatives in the state?

## **Financial Challenges — How will you ...**

- Proactively identify and address pressing financial challenges (beyond overall funding levels) associated with operating high-quality career pathways programs?

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

- Identify intermediaries who can support communication and implementation of the program?
- Make the case for and appropriate public funding to support these intermediaries and sustain their engagement in the work?
- Secure philanthropic funding to support these intermediaries if public appropriations are not available?

## **Meeting Student Needs — How will you ...**

- Assess the costs associated with meeting the needs of students accessing the new pathways?
- Cover the costs of tuition, books, fees, and transportation?
- Provide funding for district and school costs such as hiring counselors and providing navigation supports?

## **Educator Access — How will you ...**

- Determine — and proactively address — the up-front and ongoing costs associated with accessing and developing those who would be providing programs to students, including those providing guidance and supports to local districts and schools?
- Account for these costs in the initial and ongoing appropriations for the program?

# 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](http://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.

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