



# Pathways to Implementation

Building and Sustaining Effective Career Pathways

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## Communications

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

Ongoing communications are critical to sustaining the resources, energy, and demand necessary for successful implementation.<sup>1</sup> For career pathways, communications strategies must engage all key constituencies — policymakers, state agencies, industry, K-12 and postsecondary systems, communities, and students and families — and be delivered through a variety of modalities, including in-person, on-paper, and online.<sup>2</sup>

**State leaders and national experts identified the following as core characteristics of cohesive communications for career pathways initiatives:**

- **Builds on existing commitments and priorities:** Stakeholders that have already been engaged in collaboratively developing a vision and design for the initiative must align and amplify messaging with identified goals and priorities. Communications strategies should be developed as a natural extension of the visioning and design processes, reflecting established, shared understanding and commitments.<sup>3</sup>
- **Develops a value proposition for implementers:** Key stakeholders, including district and school superintendents, higher education leaders, and

#### 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.

employers, will want to know why the new program is better than what they are already doing, what they can stop doing if they implement the new program, and how the new program will benefit their schools and students. Messaging should clarify the value of the new program as well as provide guidance on how existing commitments will shift to ensure capacity for implementation.<sup>6</sup>

- **Communicates program quality and purpose to students and parents:** Parents and students need to understand the benefits of participation, including the trade-offs involved in selecting one particular pathway over another.<sup>7</sup> As they develop messaging to publicize the benefits of career pathways programs to students and families, state leaders should directly address long-standing stigmas of “tracking” and other stereotypes often associated with career and technical education (CTE) programs.
- **Maintains workforce alignment:** State workforce needs are constantly evolving. While it is critical to engage employers in vision and design, it is equally important for state leaders to keep employers in the loop about implementation and get their feedback on whether graduates are meeting their needs.<sup>8</sup> Sustaining business and industry engagement through continuous communications cycles helps ensure that pathways remain relevant to both students and employers.<sup>9</sup>
- **Establishes sustainable structures:** Collaborative engagement across stakeholders and the identification of leadership to guide processes are important for developing and disseminating appropriate messaging about career pathways.<sup>10</sup> State leaders should designate a lead partner to coordinate communications efforts and ensure that key stakeholders support the development of targeted messaging.

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

Ongoing communications about career pathways initiatives support long-term engagement in implementation efforts by continuously raising awareness of new programs and articulating their value to stakeholders.<sup>11</sup> It also requires a commitment of staffing and funds to develop, refine, coordinate, and disseminate vision-aligned messaging.<sup>12</sup> State leaders and national experts described the following common challenges to developing and maintaining cohesive communications for career pathways:

- **Lack of stakeholder engagement in message development:** When a communications campaign is developed without the input of key stakeholders (e.g., employers, educators, students, and parents) that are meant to be the targets of the campaign, the messages are unlikely to resonate.
- **Unclear messaging to educators:** Messaging that does not effectively articulate the importance of career pathways programs for all students, the types of jobs that programs help students access, or how to implement programs appropriately in local contexts is unlikely to convince educators to be champions.
- **Unclear messaging to students and parents:** Messaging that does not effectively articulate the availability and value of career pathways programs, or how to access and navigate those programs, is unlikely to convince students and parents to engage.
- **Failure to address stigma around career pathways in messaging:** Career pathways are often seen as low quality and inequitable because, in the past, they were used to track students away from college. If messaging strategies do

not address this existing stigma directly, teachers may shy away from promoting career pathways programs, and students and parents may avoid engaging in them.

- **Lack of capacity to develop messaging:** During implementation, particularly in state agencies or schools and districts where capacity is already stretched, it can be tempting to focus all available resources and energy on the nuts and bolts of program development. Unfortunately, leaving communications efforts as an afterthought can create future challenges for implementation and program uptake.

While these challenges are common across states, leaders and stakeholders in **Ohio, South Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee** have successfully developed processes to establish and maintain cohesive communications for career pathways.

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## Ohio



### **Brought Messaging to Students and Families**

The Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) invests time and resources into meeting parents and students at community events. One example is the annual Ohio State Fair, where the department staffs a booth to inform students and families about career pathways opportunities.<sup>13</sup> Cheryl Rice, vice chancellor of higher education workforce alignment at ODHE, explained: “Our agency is highly invested in the state fair. ... We have a lot of demonstrations, including hands-on STEM activities. ... There’s a virtual reality activity that gives guests an experience around what it would be like to go into a manufacturing site. ... We also have the [employers] partnering with us. They come in, and they show off their work, too.” By engaging in a popular community event, ODHE staff get **quality face time with students and families** to share important information about career pathways programming and boost awareness of their offerings.

## South Carolina



### **Tailored Communications to Stakeholder Needs**

South Carolina leaders recognized a gap in knowledge around career pathways among students and their families and adjusted their approach. Maria Swygert, assistant director in the Office of Career and Technical Education & Student Transition Services at the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE), explained, “There was a communication disparity between what we thought people knew and what they actually knew.” Engaging with the end users of career pathways programs allowed SCDE staff to identify that major knowledge gap and then make changes.

Understanding the messaging around career pathways was not effective in engaging students and families led the SCDE team to build **thoughtful communications strategies** tailored to different audiences. For example, they reflected on how students today receive information, working to create easily digestible graphics and content designed for social media channels.<sup>14</sup> Swygert shared, “We’ve done great work with building pathways maps ... [creating] graphics that will grab the attention of a 16-year-old. We realized that emails don’t work with that group. I think it is common knowledge, but sitting down and intentionally talking to everybody at the table and making sure everybody has that same basic understanding of the intent and what your goals are [around communications strategies] is key.”

### Leveraged Technology to Amplify Messaging

Recognizing the need for **diverse, adaptable forms of communication to reach students**, SCDE uses more modern forms of communication, such as social media, to spread the message around career pathways opportunities in the state.<sup>15</sup> Swygert said, “We’ve created a series of videos promoting and advertising for career clusters. ... We had them filmed at our local career centers across the state, just to ensure [representation] of different demographics, clusters, and nontraditional students. ... The idea behind it originally was to get the [state] legislature to see our kids.” In addition, SCDE created a library of resources that schools and districts could use for their own social media accounts.

## Kentucky



### Shared Relevant, Actionable Data With Policymakers

Leaders at the data hub for the state, the Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS), focused on quickly communicating data and analysis to policymakers.<sup>16</sup> Kate Akers, the vice president of policy implementation and best practices at the Data Quality Campaign who previously led at KYSTATS, reflected: “We worked very hard to prioritize and publicize things that we knew

were really in demand by policymakers, as opposed to, ‘let’s just work for 10 years and build out the system, and then maybe we’ll start putting out the report.’ No, we started cranking out reports before we had the full system in place.” By transforming the valuable lessons from the rich data in the state into **digestible materials for policymakers**, staff at KYSTATS were able to start important conversations in the state around student outcomes and secure quick wins with stakeholders in highlighting the value of the data infrastructure.

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—KATE AKERS, VICE PRESIDENT OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND BEST PRACTICES, DATA QUALITY CAMPAIGN, KENTUCKY

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### Built Knowledge Base of School and Community Partners

KYSTATS’ officials were explicit about ensuring that school and community partners were aware of the data and analysis produced by the agency to increase knowledge around strengths and challenges the school system in Kentucky faced. They took a comprehensive approach to thinking about which stakeholders to engage and used a strong partnership with a local advocacy organization to further these efforts. Akers shared the **comprehensive outreach strategy**: “I emailed all the superintendents to show them what [KYSTATS] looks like, and to give them a preview of the data and dashboards before we posted it on our website. ... We also worked with an advocacy organization called the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, and they really helped us connect

with parents [and] connect with others in the community that were really interested.” In breaking down barriers to data access, KYSTATS’ staff equipped a wide group of stakeholders with the information needed to make informed decisions about education advocacy in the state.

## Tennessee



### Communicated the Value Proposition of Career Pathways to Implementers

Leaders in Tennessee recognized early on that career pathways initiatives could be viewed with skepticism or exhaustion from on-the-ground practitioners who already had so much on their plate. Instead, they focused on **communicating to teachers and school leaders why any new initiative was a value-add** to those working in schools. Jerre Maynor Jr., the former senior director of career pathways at the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), explained, “Whenever we tried to implement something like career pathway certifications, we had to show the superintendents, schools, secondary supervisors — the people who are at the end of the day accountable — how this eliminates or reduces other things that they are struggling with. That’s the only way to get them to pay attention to this new thing. Everyone’s got initiative fatigue.”

For example, when creating the Tennessee Pathways Certification, state leaders ensured the criteria for the certification closely mirrored requirements already laid out by the federal Perkins statute, so that earning the certification would require almost no additional work while also earning them positive public recognition.<sup>17</sup> Efforts like this helped in building buy-in on the ground, which was central to increasing fidelity of implementation and sustainability in programming.

### Dismantled Misconceptions

Due to years of “tracking” in schools across the country that left many students behind, some stakeholders understandably felt uneasy around pathways work, questioning whether this was a new version of a dated practice.<sup>18</sup> Leaders in Tennessee worked to shift that culture, **making it explicit that CTE and other similar programs were high quality**. They connected CTE program standards to ACT questions for each career cluster, for example, to underscore the value of postsecondary opportunities and highlight the academic rigor of CTE coursework.<sup>19</sup> Maynor explained that it was critical to shift “the culture of CTE from the idea of it being a lower-expectations tracking system.” In his role at TDOE, he spoke at conferences where CTE directors attended to share the state’s seamless postsecondary transition work — breaking down the misconception that CTE learners would not pursue postsecondary opportunities. He also noted that constituency groups, such as school counselors and community college leaders, were involved in outreach around CTE, which lent legitimacy to the programs.

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

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# Communications: Considerations for State Leaders and Policymakers

As they seek to establish cohesive **communications** for career pathways implementation, state agency leaders and policymakers should consider the following questions.

## ***Structures and Processes — How will you ...***

- Designate a leader for the communications effort that will ensure the development of appropriate and compelling messaging?
- Engage stakeholders to understand their interests and needs, and use that knowledge to inform broader communications efforts?
- Establish review processes that ensure that messaging is aligned with the vision and goals of the pathways initiative?

## ***Sustained Communications — How will you ...***

- Establish the cadence and content of ongoing, coordinated communications among stakeholders beyond the initial startup conversations?
- Ensure continuing communications and coordination among state leaders and local providers about the implementation of career pathways programming?
- Sustain and/or improve ongoing communication and coordination?

## ***Addressing Concerns — How will you ...***

- Communicate policies to students, parents, and educators?
- Ensure that those communications acknowledge and respond to long-standing beliefs and existing concerns about career pathways programs?

## ***Communicating Value — How will you ...***

- Ensure that students understand the role of the career pathways programs in their educational and postsecondary journeys?
- Ensure that students know how to access the resources made available through these programs?

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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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