



# Pathways to Implementation

Building and Sustaining Effective Career Pathways

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## Continuous Improvement

### What Is Continuous Improvement, and Why Is It Important for Career Pathways Implementation?

Effective implementation includes a plan for continuous improvement. Continuous improvement processes allow programs to stay current by using outcomes data to adjust program design.<sup>1</sup> For career pathways programs, continuous improvement processes ensure that the pathways prepare students for workforce opportunities that are sustaining and in demand.<sup>2</sup>

**State leaders and national experts identified the following as core characteristics of effective continuous improvement processes for career pathways initiatives:**

- **Includes regular review cycles:** To remain relevant, career pathways programs should have a built-in process of periodic review to determine whether the program is continued, shifted, or terminated.<sup>3</sup> Program effectiveness should be evaluated with respect to standards that are developed with stakeholder engagement, set during the program design process, and aligned with the goals of the program.

#### 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.

- **Responds to practitioner feedback:** School leaders and educators are the “boots on the ground” for career pathways implementation and will have firsthand experience in what is either working for or creating barriers to student participation and success. State leaders can leverage this knowledge to the benefit of programs by ensuring that practitioners have a seat at the table in program evaluation processes.
- **Adjusts to improve performance:** Both those designing career pathways programs and those implementing such programs should come to the table willing to adjust over time. If data demonstrates that the original program design is not leading to the desired goals, stakeholders should be willing to work together to shift the design.<sup>6</sup>
- **Responds to current labor market data:** The educational, economic, and workforce landscape of any state is continuously evolving; programs also need to evolve to keep pace with these changes.<sup>7</sup> Career pathways programs need to be informed by current labor market data, tracking changes in a state’s workforce needs and periodically reassessing whether the high-value credentials of the past are still relevant today.
- **Keeps employers engaged over time:** Continuously improving career pathways programs requires states to maintain close, ongoing connections with the industries and businesses that drive their statewide economy.<sup>8</sup> Employers need to drive the conversations around which credentials are of greatest value in the workplace. Career pathways should be a consistent agenda item for statewide business forums.

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

Continuous improvement is necessary to keep career pathways programs fresh, accessible, and on target for what is most valuable to both students and employers. However, it takes a considerable amount of work to track program outcomes, adjust program design and delivery, and help stakeholders understand that program success is an ongoing process. State leaders and national experts described the following common challenges to developing and maintaining a continuous improvement strategy for career pathways:

- **Lack of consensus around intended program outcomes:** If key stakeholders, including but not limited to policymakers, K-12 and postsecondary leaders and educators, business leaders, and students and families, do not agree on what a given career pathways program was meant to achieve, it will be difficult to refine that program in a consistent direction.
- **Lack of outcomes data to evaluate program effectiveness:** If stakeholders have not engaged in a process to identify the most valuable measures to track progress or set up systems to gather, report, and analyze the necessary data, it will be difficult to understand the effectiveness of the program or have an evidence base to guide changes.
- **Lack of capacity (staff and skills) to analyze data:** Program data will not support continuous improvement if there is no staff capacity to analyze that data and use that analysis to make recommendations for improvement.

While these challenges are common across states, leaders and stakeholders in **Delaware, Colorado, and Indiana** have successfully developed processes to establish and maintain continuous improvement processes for career pathways.

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## Delaware



### Instituted Regular Review Cycles

The Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) administrative policies require a **review of all career and technical education (CTE) programs every five years.**<sup>9</sup> The reviews are completed by a committee for each CTE program. The committee is composed of high school and postsecondary educators, students, a representative from the Delaware Workforce Development Board, employers, community-based organizations, and equity experts. Jonathan Wickert, director of CTE and STEM initiatives at DDOE, emphasized the role of data, including **labor market data**, throughout the review process. He explained, “The review process is all data-driven, and it’s all tied to the program committee. So, they’ll look at that data, make recommendations, and then we’ll make final determinations.” By engaging a wide range of stakeholders every few years, state leaders ensure that CTE programming remains up-to-date and relevant for learners.

## Adjusted Programs Based on Data

In Delaware, data on participation in career pathways programs inform conversations and adjustments to program offerings and funding. Rachel Turney, deputy secretary at the Delaware Department of Labor, shared how these data brought to light a participation gap among students with disabilities. She said, “Schools started to share the demographics of who was participating, what pathways were popular. The sharing of the data became a venue for feedback. For example, that was the catalyst for the students with disabilities work, because you could see that there was an equity issue and a gap for participation among students with disabilities. Once you have a venue for the stakeholders where they can come together and talk, and you’re sharing data, then you can provide feedback for continuous improvement, or at least brainstorm potential solutions.” The review of program data allows Delaware officials to **adjust policies and programming based on emerging needs and equity gaps**, ensuring their responsiveness to what is happening on the ground.

## Colorado



### Established Biennial Local Needs Assessments

Colorado’s career pathways leaders engage each region of the state in a local needs assessment every two years to understand where gaps exist and to adjust policies, funding, or programming to address them.<sup>10</sup> Sarah Heath, the vice chancellor of academic and student affairs for the Colorado Community College System, detailed the review cycle, saying, “Every two years, each region goes through a needs assessment process to make sure that we’re offering **programs that align to the region’s needs and demands.** ... [We] lead people through assessment questions of their programs: where they’re at now and where they would like to be. And then we focus the funding on the gap. ... We spend a lot of time on comprehensive local needs assessments. It’s something that we use as a tool.”

## Engaged Practitioners' Voices

Colorado policy changes are directly informed by practitioners' experiences implementing career pathways programs — and the engagement of those practitioners continues even after initial implementation. Shannon Nicholas, the chief of staff at Colorado Succeeds, shared, "The implementers of these policies are now serving as experts and guides as we think about strengthening and modernizing the different learner programs into singular pathways, or into a system that helps make it accessible for many more students. They're now the vocal champions of that. They're the experts who are going to be the partners who helped the state make that work possible." Colorado leaders rely on on-the-ground knowledge and expertise to inform policy changes, which not only allows for the most relevant career pathways programming but also builds trust among practitioners.

Scott Laband, president of Colorado Succeeds, offered a specific example of when feedback from practitioners directly informed policy change at the state level. He explained that concurrent enrollment in Colorado was historically defined by service area agreements.<sup>11</sup> This meant that if you were a student attending high school in Denver, the only community college that you could earn credit from was the Community College of Denver, regardless of whether they offered the program you wanted or whether it was affordable. Laband said, "High schools told us they weren't able to get the most cost-effective concurrent enrollment classes for their students that met student demand because they were required to adhere to these service area agreements. We brought that feedback to the [Colorado] Department of Higher Education and the [Colorado] Commission on Higher Education, and that policy was ultimately changed." By acting as a conduit for practitioner feedback, Colorado Succeeds staff made policymakers aware of challenges on the ground, leading to change that improved accessibility for learners.

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—SHANNON NICHOLAS, CHIEF OF STAFF, COLORADO SUCCEEDS

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## Indiana



### Embraced Stakeholders' Willingness to Innovate

Indiana officials indicated a willingness to try new things, even if they do not always work out. This intentional approach to design allows the state to **test creative, outside-the-box ideas and refine them as they go**. David Buyze, director of policy and special programs at the Indiana Department of Education, explained, "I get enough of a willingness from the top leaders to be bold and to try new stuff, knowing it won't be perfect or may not all work out in the end." He pointed to first drafts of the redesign of high school diplomas, an innovative new approach to thinking about education credentialing, as an idea that required rounds of drafts before consensus was built. He also noted that the Indiana Career Scholarship Account program, the funding of intermediaries, and adjunct teacher permits are all results of the state's willingness to innovate.<sup>12</sup>

# Continuous Improvement: Considerations for State Leaders and Policymakers

As they seek to establish **continuous improvement** processes for career pathways implementation, state agency leaders and policymakers should consider the following critical questions.

## **Data Responsibilities — How will you ...**

- Determine which entities or individuals are responsible for various data activities related to the career pathways initiative, including reporting, analysis, and action?
- Develop an appropriate accountability structure for these entities?
- Embed continuous improvement within the data strategy for the career pathways initiative and articulate which data elements will feed into those continuous improvement processes?

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

- Engage local stakeholders, including community organizations, students and parents, and employers, in continuously improving delivery of career pathways programs?
- Engage employers in verifying the value of pathways for students?
- Elevate the voices of students and parents to improve access to and uptake of programs?

## **State Administrators — How will you ...**

- Determine the role of state administrators in continuous program improvement and reflect this role in the policy revision cycle?
- Set legislative, regulatory, or other requirements for review and clearly articulate associated roles and responsibilities?

# 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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