




Scaling What Works

*Lessons on Creating a Career-Connected Learning
Ecosystem From Four Leading States*

By Brian Robinson, Mark Baxter, Juliet Squire, and Sharmila Mann

DECEMBER 2025



State policymakers and education leaders have an opportunity to build cohesive, career-connected ecosystems aligned with state goals that incentivize districts to adopt multiple evidence-based models responsive to the needs of students and employers in their region.

Introduction

In the face of a rapidly changing economy, it is incumbent on state leaders across the country to develop aligned education and workforce policies to ensure that young people are prepared for the jobs of tomorrow. [Scaling What Works: Policies to Support Individual High School Career-Connected Learning Models](#) outlines concrete steps that state policymakers can take to launch and scale evidence-based career-connected learning models that provide young people with an early start on pursuing their postsecondary and career goals. These policies are critical to the development of specific high school models. On their own, however, they can leave gaps that prevent multiple models from achieving scale in states.

State policymakers and education leaders have an opportunity to build cohesive, career-connected ecosystems aligned with state goals that incentivize districts to adopt multiple evidence-based models responsive to the needs of students and employers in their region.

Four leading states — **Tennessee, Colorado, Delaware, and Texas** — have developed ecosystems where multiple career-connected learning models have been able to emerge and grow. This brief analyzes the policies and partnerships that underlie their approaches. They are not yet perfect, but these four states have made purposeful progress toward aligning education, workforce, and economic development systems so that diverse models can operate side by side.

Collectively, these states illustrate what it looks like to move toward a more integrated and sustainable career-connected learning ecosystem. They surface policy recommendations other states can adopt to encourage the growth of multiple models within their regions and help ensure all students leave high school prepared for their postsecondary and career journey.

Tennessee: A Broad Vision, Aligned Programs, and Dedicated Funding

Tennessee illustrates how political champions can unify K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems around a bold, sustained vision to pilot and scale high school-based career-connected learning models. Recent progress in Tennessee can be traced back to 2013, when then-Gov. Bill Haslam set a goal for the state: Increase the percentage of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential from 37.8% to 55% by 2025.¹ Known as “Drive to 55,” the initiative brought a wide variety of stakeholders together around a shared vision for state postsecondary attainment.

Drive to 55 catalyzed investments in foundational programs like Tennessee Pathways, which bridged the disconnect between K-12 education, labor and workforce development, economic and community development, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, the Tennessee Board of Regents, and employers.² Tennessee Pathways was structured around three key elements:

- High-quality college and career advisement in high school.
- Effective partnerships resulting in vertical alignment among K-12, postsecondary programs, and career opportunities.
- Rigorous early postsecondary and work-based learning opportunities in high school.³

The ultimate goal of Tennessee Pathways was to align policies, priorities, technical assistance, and funding streams to create conditions that support the implementation of education-to-career learning pathways, **agnostic of model**. It led to efforts such as the creation of a work-based learning framework to help set standards for internships, apprenticeships, and co-ops in the state.⁴ Regional and local pathway partners in Tennessee developed strategic plans to meet specific workforce needs in their regions, as part of a larger community commitment to implement Tennessee Pathways initiatives.⁵

When Gov. Bill Lee succeeded Gov. Haslam in 2019, he built on the momentum of Drive to 55 to **align state funding** with career pathways initiatives. He established the Governor’s Investment in Vocational Education (GIVE) Act, expanding opportunities for dual enrollment in high-demand vocational and technical programs. Gov. Lee also led the effort to create a new K-12 student funding formula, the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA), which provides outcomes-based funding tied to student progress in career and technical education (CTE) programs aligned with high-wage, in-demand occupations.⁶

In 2021, Tennessee Pathways morphed into the Innovative School Models (ISMs) initiative, “building readiness and preparing students for success after high school.”⁷ ISM is a \$500 million investment to districts as **grants to reimagine how schools deliver career-connected learning**.⁸ Schools can use ISM funds to support the development or expansion of programs aimed at helping students earn industry credentials, earn college credit, or get job-embedded learning. Programs funded to date include extended learning opportunities, early postsecondary learning opportunities (e.g., work-based learning, dual enrollment), and remote course delivery models, which are especially beneficial for students in rural communities.⁹ As of 2024, 137 school districts and 45 public charter schools have built ISMs across Tennessee.¹⁰

What started as a statewide effort to support access to strong pathway programs under Gov. Haslam expanded into an investment in dual enrollment and CTE under Gov. Lee, and then into the ISM initiative. Along the way, a shared statewide vision, ongoing efforts to align across programs, technical assistance for implementing work-based learning, outcomes-based funding incentives, and district grants have helped Tennessee make progress in its efforts to prepare its students for life after high school.

Colorado: Shared Definitions, Unified Governance, and Funding Incentives

Colorado's reform efforts began in 2008 with the passage of the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K), a landmark law that sought to align the state's education and workforce systems around a shared definition of postsecondary and workforce readiness. This legislative vision laid the foundation for greater cross-agency coordination, and alignment around **shared definitions** has paid dividends as state agencies have sought to improve readiness ever since.

To support implementation of CAP4K, Colorado created the Office of Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) within the Colorado Department of Education (CDE). This office helps districts design personalized high school pathways, expand postsecondary and career options, align local programs with state workforce needs, and support employers with information on how to engage in pathway efforts.¹¹

One way the PWR office supports the implementation and scaling of career-connected learning models is through **funding incentives**. The Career Development Success Program provides grants of up to \$1,000 to districts and charter schools for each student who earns a qualified industry credential; completes a pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, or internship; or completes a computer science Advanced Placement course.¹² In addition, districts can earn 120% of the per-pupil amount for each student who completes the aforementioned and is eligible for free or reduced-price meals.¹³ The number of programs funded by this initiative has skyrocketed from 1,807 in 2016 to 14,153 across 98 school districts in 2025.¹⁴

Despite the PWR's efforts, fragmentation proved persistent. In 2022, the Colorado General Assembly created the *Secondary, Postsecondary, and Work-Based Learning Integration Task Force* (Task Force).¹⁵ This cross-agency group, composed of representatives from CDE, the Colorado Department of Higher Education, and the Colorado Workforce Development Council, found that siloed management and reporting requirements across PWR programs continued to impose significant administrative burdens on schools.¹⁶ Since the Task Force's recommendations in 2023 and a financial study in 2024, Colorado has **consolidated its PWR programs** into three funding streams that provide startup funds, innovation grants, and outcomes-based funding to support districts in creating and sustaining PWR programs.¹⁷

As part of the consolidation, the state updated its accountability indicator to credit schools and districts for postsecondary credit attainment, work-based learning participation, and the percentage of students who earn an industry-recognized credential — for which districts still receive outcomes-based funding.¹⁸

By aligning funding streams and accountability systems, Colorado incentivizes districts to develop the **models that best suit local needs**. Districts can adopt any state-approved CTE program or create their own local career pathway aligned to state workforce priorities, effectively balancing state support and guidance, regional labor market needs, and a focus on outcomes. In addition, Colorado has created **specialized diplomas** that highlight successful completion of college and career readiness indicators.

Delaware: Braided Funding and a Focus on Quality

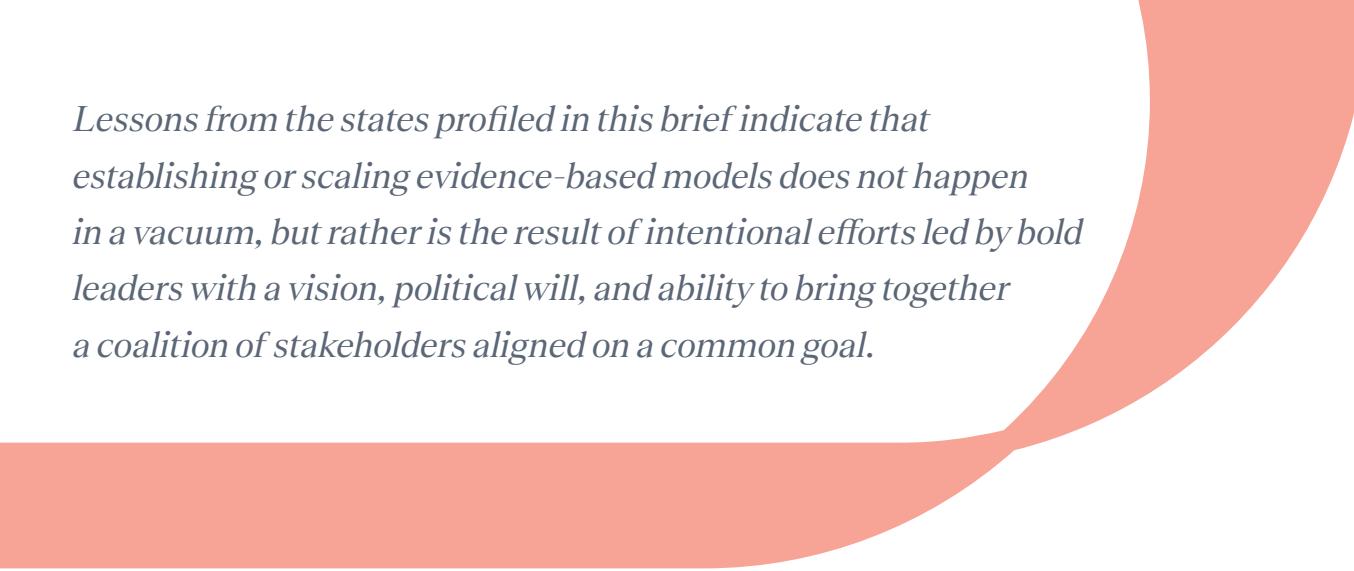
The creation of Delaware Pathways, a statewide initiative designed to connect students, communities, and employers through career pathways that start in middle school, is a lesson on how states can leverage existing financial resources to build and sustain high-quality career-connected learning models at every high school in the state.

At its inception in 2016, Delaware Pathways received no dedicated state funding. Yet by **braiding multiple funding sources**, aligning state and federal investments with philanthropic funds, Delaware was able to pilot programs and coordinate across agencies while using its federal Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) dollars to invest in districts to quickly scale what worked.¹⁹ Delaware also leveraged key intermediaries such as Delaware Technical Community College (Delaware Tech), United Way of Delaware, and Rodel to support identifying and coordinating resources across the state (Disclosure).²⁰ Now, every Delaware district and most high schools offer Delaware Pathways.²¹

Once the initiative was underway, the Delaware Pathways Steering Committee began aligning state resources from Delaware's Departments of Education and Labor, alongside federal resources such as Perkins V, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and the American Rescue Plan Act, to coordinate youth funding across these three programs to further support the work. Delaware's combined WIOA State Plan integrates Perkins V funding and embeds CTE within its broader workforce and education strategy. Delaware also uses its Perkins Reserve Fund to award innovation grants to districts to support the implementation of state-model CTE programs of study, work-based learning, and credential attainment.²²

Additional grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor to the Delaware Department of Labor and Delaware Tech supported industry certifications and the expansion of apprenticeship programs. Delaware's K-12 funding formula also supports CTE through allocated educator units for vocational teachers as well as funding for schools to administer and sustain programs.²³

Finally, **to support quality and responsiveness to local needs**, Delaware established a process that allows districts to adopt and support rigorous state-developed pathway programs or develop locally tailored programs of study. To continue receiving state funding for their locally developed programs, districts must have them reviewed and approved by the Delaware Department of Education to ensure they meet the same level of rigor and outcomes as state-model programs.



Lessons from the states profiled in this brief indicate that establishing or scaling evidence-based models does not happen in a vacuum, but rather is the result of intentional efforts led by bold leaders with a vision, political will, and ability to bring together a coalition of stakeholders aligned on a common goal.

Texas: Shared Data, Accountability, and Continuous Improvement

Texas offers a compelling example of how states can embed career-connected learning metrics into **accountability systems** and use aligned data to support continuous improvement and scaling efforts. These approaches help advance the state's ambitious goal that at least 60% of Texans attain a postsecondary credential by 2030.²⁴

When it comes to accountability, Texas relies on the College, Career, and Military Readiness (CCMR) indicator. CCMR captures a wide range of outcomes, including college credit earned, industry certifications, enlistment in the military, and performance on the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA).²⁵ TSIA allows Texas to measure student preparedness beyond traditional academic metrics and is a core component of the state's A-F accountability system. As outcomes-based funding in Texas is provided as bonuses to K-12 districts that graduate students who exceed a certain percentage threshold on the CCMR indicator, the measure not only creates a **shared definition of success** but also serves as the foundation for funding incentives.²⁶

Texas has a long history of leveraging data to support ongoing evaluation and strategic planning. In 2006, the Texas Legislature established Education Research Centers, a comprehensive **longitudinal data system** housed at three public universities across the state.²⁷ This system links K-12, postsecondary, and workforce data, allowing the state to track students from high school through postsecondary education and into the labor market.²⁸ Shared definitions and metrics across multiple agencies enhance data sharing and decision-making and enable the tracking of critical cross-system student outcomes such as credential attainment, dual enrollment credit, work-based learning completion, and employment.


The state also supports **continuous improvement** by providing public transparency and data utility for multiple end users. The Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board leverage the interagency database to publish data dashboards of school- and regional-level insights on student performance.²⁹ These dashboards are used by policymakers and practitioners to evaluate progress, identify gaps, and refine strategies.

While it is important to have a core set of common data across programs to get a sense of statewide progress on attainment, Texas also recognizes that tracking certain **program-specific outcomes** requires additional data asks. As Texas scales career-connected learning models, it has implemented model-specific data-reporting requirements to ensure quality and accountability as programs grow. For example, the Pathways In Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) Blueprint mandates data reporting on student credential attainment, employer engagement, and pass rates on end-of-course assessments.³⁰ These additional data elements support the continuous improvement of the state's extensive P-TECH program implementation. As of 2025, Texas has 222 early college high schools and 289 P-TECH high schools, many of which serve economically disadvantaged and first-generation college students.³¹ The need for shared definitions of success alongside the need for program-specific outcomes will be an ongoing balancing act for Texas.

Recommendations for State Leaders

States seeking to build or scale evidence-based high school career-connected learning models can make progress on any one model by implementing specific supportive policies, outlined in [Scaling What Works: Policies to Support Individual High School Career-Connected Learning Models](#). Yet building an ecosystem of models benefits from having additional policies in place. Lessons from the states profiled in this brief indicate that establishing or scaling evidence-based models does not happen in a vacuum, but rather is the result of intentional efforts led by bold leaders with a vision, political will, and ability to bring together a coalition of stakeholders aligned on a common goal. While none have fully solved the challenge of scaling these models in high school, these four states offer lessons on how to make progress toward that goal. Each state continues to refine its systems, respond to changing needs, and improve over time.

The Tennessee, Colorado, Delaware, and Texas profiles elevate seven actionable recommendations for states, organized into two categories: foundational recommendations and advancing recommendations. Foundational recommendations shape the political, structural, and financial conditions under which models can be launched, sustained, and scaled. Advancing recommendations ensure that career-connected learning models are not only developed but also evidence-based and outcomes-driven. Working together, these policy recommendations can support career-connected learning models that have the strongest evidence of putting high school students on the path to postsecondary success.



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Foundational Recommendations: Setting the Stage

1. VISION: Establish a clear and unifying statewide vision that defines the purpose of career-connected learning and sets specific, measurable goals for student success and credential attainment aligned with various high school models.

The precursor to the development of any sustained reform effort is a powerful political champion with a vision. The development of a statewide high school career-connected learning ecosystem is no exception, and it is especially important for developing an ecosystem of multiple models that require the engagement of K-12 education, postsecondary education, and industry partners.

A bold attainment goal — like Tennessee’s Drive to 55 and Texas’ aspiration that 60% of Texans have a postsecondary credential — is powerful. **By setting a North Star and organizing state systems around it**, policymakers can drive cross-agency collaboration, focus investments, and build long-term momentum for reform.

The result of these efforts has been a steady expansion of multiple career-connected learning models in Tennessee and Texas. State-level leadership, often from the governor’s office, can signal the importance of the work and provide the authority needed to unify fragmented systems. A state leader can **articulate a bold vision; build buy-in across key stakeholder groups** like students and families, educators, and employers; and **invest political capital** to bring that vision to life.

Finally, state leaders can bring focus to the specific need for high school-based career-connected learning models by: setting K-12 **benchmarks and timelines**; clarifying how progress will be measured; and identifying the funding, policies, and partnerships necessary to support the critical role that high schools play in preparing students for their next step, as well as the key outcomes high schools should be working to achieve.

2. GOVERNANCE: Build coordinated governance structures that clarify roles, streamline decision-making, and align efforts across K-12, higher education, workforce, and economic development systems.

When programs proliferate in silos, local actors (e.g., schools, districts, employers, colleges) face multiple sets of rules, reporting requirements, and partnership structures tied to specific models. State and local education systems often lack the human and financial capital and expertise to manage these complex systems, especially absent a single governance structure to oversee coordination across programs. A well-functioning career-connected learning ecosystem depends on **coordinated governance**.

Leading states like Colorado offer a compelling example of how state law and regulation and strong cross-agency collaboration can reduce fragmentation and drive alignment by creating a central governance entity. A central governance entity can help create **alignment among K-12, higher education, workforce, and economic development leaders**. It can also set priorities and goals, assess progress, and respond to labor market needs.

Building on these statewide priorities and goals, a central governance entity can also streamline statewide operations and ensure accountability by consolidating authority over funding and support for program implementation.

3. BRAIDED FUNDING: Coordinate funding and leverage resources to support the development and scaling of career-connected learning models.

States cannot scale high-quality career-connected learning models without aligning resources across systems, but they often create categorical funding streams for specific models (e.g., P-TECH funding, dual enrollment funding, youth apprenticeship grants). This can have the unintended consequence of encouraging schools and districts to pursue whichever model brings funding, even if it is not the approach that best supports students. In contrast, **braided funding ensures that resources are not siloed** by model, reducing competition among programs. Delaware, Tennessee, and Colorado demonstrate how coordinated funding ecosystems aligned to common goals can support an ecosystem of career-connected learning models.

To achieve this same level of alignment, state leaders begin by identifying existing **federal, state, and private funding sources** they can leverage for career-connected learning. This includes braiding federal funds such as Perkins V, WIOA, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), aligning agency budgets, and engaging local philanthropies during the planning phase to build early momentum and shared ownership. Delaware's early progress was fueled by flexible philanthropic capital and a cross-agency approach to braiding existing funds and leveraging the Perkins Reserve Fund to invest in districts.

States can strengthen their impact by issuing joint guidance from K-12 and workforce agencies that **help local leaders blend funds into unified budgets**. States can build on Delaware's work by providing specific examples of how braided funding can support statewide goals. For example, to increase the

number of students completing high-quality work-based learning experiences, a school can use ESSA Title IV, Part A grants for career exploration technology, Perkins V formula funds for teacher training on available work-based learning opportunities, and WIOA youth funds for supporting eligible students with paid experiences.

Advancing Recommendations: Supporting Evidence-Based Models That Deliver for Students

4. DATA AND ACCOUNTABILITY: Integrate data and accountability systems to measure outcomes, identify gaps, and improve system performance over time.

The benefits of integrated early childhood to workforce data systems are many; for career-connected learning models, they are critical to ensuring state leaders have linked data to understand student trajectories after graduation. When data systems include **aligned metrics and definitions across models**, they can support comparisons and continuous improvement, enable real-time decision-making, and allow for accountability.

Investing in **longitudinal data systems** that follow students from education into the labor market, such as Texas' interagency database, requires bringing together leaders from K-12, higher education, workforce agencies, and employers to establish shared goals and definitions. This collaboration can clarify what data is already collected, what is still needed to measure impact, and who is responsible for data stewardship.

In addition, Texas and Colorado have shown how states can embed career-readiness indicators into accountability frameworks. Colorado's PWR accountability indicator and Texas' CCMR indicator offer models for incorporating college and career readiness into school evaluations. This clear articulation of desired outcomes creates incentives for districts to adopt models that meet the needs of students while contributing to statewide goals.

Emerging states can build similar capacity by **bringing together leaders from K-12, higher education, workforce agencies, and employers to establish shared goals and definitions**. This collaboration can clarify what data is already collected, what is still needed to measure impact, and who is responsible for data stewardship. **Investing in longitudinal data systems** that follow students from education into the labor market, such as Texas' Education Research Centers, enables ongoing analysis and continuous improvement. This includes publishing data dashboards to share progress across regions and models and create opportunities for cross-sector leaders to regularly analyze the data and refine implementation strategies.

5. PARTNERSHIPS: Build and sustain partnerships with employers, K-12 and postsecondary institutions, and intermediaries to bring models to life and adapt them to regional labor needs.

Career-connected learning is most effective when it reflects the needs and strengths of local economies. Leading states have built strong regional partnerships that bring together employers, colleges, K-12 systems, and workforce stakeholders. Intermediaries play a critical role in making components of career-connected models work on the ground (e.g., CareerWise in Colorado and Delaware Tech in Delaware are vital to increasing student access to work-based learning opportunities; the Delaware Pathways Steering Committee was vital to leveraging access to resources and supports for districts).³² To scale high-quality models, states must intentionally **invest in statewide and regional partnerships** and **build the infrastructure necessary** to support them.

State leaders can also strengthen regional ecosystems by **empowering intermediaries to manage employer outreach, provide technical assistance to schools, and ensure program quality**. Regional economic development and workforce agencies should be directed to collaborate with districts on school model design, particularly in underserved or rural areas. By creating this ecosystem of support, states reduce the burden on school leaders to take on all aspects of model implementation and leverage the broader expertise within regions. States can encourage this alignment through policy levers such as requiring K-12 representation on economic development councils. At the same time, state funding should support intermediaries and partnerships through grants or contracts that clearly define responsibilities and expected outcomes.

6. STANDARDS: Set clear, enforceable quality standards with designations to ensure consistency, rigor, and equity across career-connected learning models.

Quality standards and designations incentivize schools and districts to develop high-quality career-connected learning programs, signal quality to families and employers, and support fidelity to state goals. **Designation or certification systems**, such as Tennessee's "Pathways Certification," recognize schools and programs that meet or exceed defined expectations while creating a framework for continuous improvement. These designations not only reinforce fidelity to the state's vision but also make it easier to scale models that demonstrate strong outcomes and alignment to labor market needs.

State leaders must **develop formal blueprints or rubrics** that articulate the essential components of high-quality models. These blueprints should include crosscutting standards (e.g., strong postsecondary and industry partnerships, alignment to labor market demand, equitable access), that connect across different models to maximize the ability of districts to develop models that meet local needs. For example, Texas' P-TECH Blueprint and Tennessee's work-based learning framework offer clear criteria for program excellence.³³

States can further incentivize model adoption by **embedding employability skills, career planning, and social capital development into academic standards or graduation requirements**. In Colorado, students can earn a PWR-endorsed diploma by meeting multiple indicators of college and career readiness. This provides a helpful model for defining these broader competencies in ways that reinforce academic, technical, and career readiness.³⁴

7. FUNDING INCENTIVES: Create funding mechanisms that encourage the adoption of models that are most likely to produce positive outcomes, including the evidence-based models analyzed in this brief.

Funding is a critical lever for state leaders to use for scaling models. Initial startup funding can bring districts and employers to the table to design and launch new school models. Startup funds can come through either competitive grants to districts or tax incentives to employers for activities like hiring youth apprentices. Both Tennessee and Colorado offered financial incentives to districts through grants to encourage the development of career-connected models.

Building on formula funding programs, states can also **offer incentive grants** that support performance, where districts unlock funding based on milestones universal to all career-connected models, such as credential attainment, dual enrollment completion, or work-based learning participation. This can drive outcomes and encourage innovation, even in low-resource communities. Pay-for-performance grants can promote equity by incentivizing schools to focus on closing gaps rather than simply meeting aggregate targets, and by offering higher bonuses when underrepresented students reach key milestones. States can further their equity goals by **designing funding models that prioritize rural and high-need communities** by providing higher matching rates or shared resources, such as regional equipment grants.

Conclusion

States have made significant progress in expanding access to career-connected learning through models including career academies, CTE dual or concurrent enrollment, CTE programs of study, early college high schools, P-TECH, and youth apprenticeship. However, these models can sometimes operate in silos, which leads to programs competing for funding, duplicating efforts, and creating confusion for students and families. This brief illustrates that coherent, student-centered systems are not only possible but already exist in several leading states.

Tennessee, Colorado, Delaware, and Texas have shown what is possible when leadership aligns vision; governance; braided funding and incentives; data and accountability; partnerships; and quality standards around a shared goal. Each state's success in scaling career-connected learning models is the result of intentional, long-term investment in the priority enabling conditions that allow strong models to thrive and deliver for students. By learning from these leading states, emerging states can tailor similar strategies to their local context, setting the course for lasting impact. ✨

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About the Authors



BRIAN ROBINSON

Brian Robinson, Ph.D., is an associate partner at Bellwether. He can be reached at brian.robinson@bellwether.org.



MARK BAXTER

Mark Baxter is a partner and leads the state and federal systems work at Bellwether. He can be reached at mark.baxter@bellwether.org.



JULIET SQUIRE

Juliet Squire is a senior partner and the head of emerging approaches at Bellwether. She can be reached at juliet.squire@bellwether.org.



SHARMILA MANN

Sharmila Mann is a former associate partner at Bellwether.

About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that works to transform education to ensure young people — especially those furthest from opportunity — achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we help mission-driven partners accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and bring leaders together to drive change on education's most pressing challenges. For more, visit bellwether.org.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the many experts who gave their time and shared their knowledge with us to inform our work, including Kristy Brown, Charlotte Cahill, Kyle Hartung, Andrew Hodge, Deborah Knoll, Kate Kreamer, Monica Martinez, Danielle Ongart, Alex Perry, Luke Rhine, and Bryce Warden. Thank you also to the Walton Family Foundation for its financial support of this project.

We would also like to thank our Bellwether colleague Colleen Campbell for her input and former Bellwether colleague Janine Sandy for her support. Thank you to Amy Ribock, Kate Stein, Andy Jacob, McKenzie Maxson, Temim Fruchter, Julie Nguyen, and Amber Walker for shepherding and disseminating this work, and to Super Copy Editors.

The contributions of these individuals and entities significantly enhanced our work; however, any errors in fact or analysis remain the responsibility of the authors.

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Separate from the creation of this career-connected learning brief, Bellwether partnered with Rodel and currently works with the Texas Education Agency.



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