

# Building Blocks Toward the Big Blur

## State Policy Framework – Version 3.0

### AT A GLANCE

Jobs for the Future (JFF) is developing this state policy framework to outline the steps states can take toward fully adopting each of the Big Blur's four key components and creating a more effective system for grades 11-14. The framework describes a continuum of four types of state policy environments that states currently have or will experience on the road toward a fully reimagined system of education-to-career pathways that work for all students.

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## About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

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# Introduction

## About the Big Blur

[The Big Blur](#) argues for the need to erase the arbitrary boundaries between high school, college, and careers and create one new system for grades 11-14. The model opens the opportunity for all students to start earning a postsecondary credential and preparing for career success in 11th grade.<sup>1</sup> Two years of innovative postsecondary education would be free to everyone, just like the years of elementary and secondary school. The Blur is meant to remove the barriers many students face when applying to, entering, and trying to complete college, transforming the path from high school to postsecondary credentials to a career. Rather than having separate institutions, the Blur is an integrated approach to better serve 16-to-20-year-olds and support the country's economy.



## Key Features of the Big Blur

Fulfilling the Big Blur vision will require a shift away from an approach of tinkering with existing systems and creating workarounds to address the limitations of current models.

Rather, the Blur requires large-scale systems transformation and policy redesign focused on four key features:



**INCENTIVES** for accountability and financing to promote new ways of organizing learning



**ALIGNMENT** of high schools, colleges, and labor markets so that 11th-grade students enter new institutional structures focused on postsecondary credentials and career preparation



**GOVERNANCE** model that unifies decision-making authority over grades 11-14 as well as over districts and postsecondary institutions that are working as a unified institution



**STAFFING** structures designed to equip specially trained educators and leaders to teach, curate, and organize learning, work experiences, and support systems for students in grades 11-14.

## About the Framework

JFF is developing this state policy framework to outline the steps states can take toward fully adopting each of the Blur's four key components and creating a more effective system for grades 11-14. The framework describes a continuum of four types of state policy environments that states currently have or will experience on the road toward a fully reimagined system of education-to-career pathways that work for all students.

The four policy environments are:

**FRAGMENTED** → **COORDINATED** → **INTEGRATED** → **TRANSFORMED**

- **FRAGMENTED:** State policy conditions maintain separate and distinct overarching governance, rules, funding, and accountability structures for K-12, postsecondary, career and technical education, and workforce systems serving youth and young adults while providing limited or no incentives and authorizing policies for shared approaches and accountability.
- **COORDINATED:** State policy conditions maintain separate and distinct overarching governance, rules, funding, and accountability structures for K-12, postsecondary, career and technical education, and workforce systems serving youth and young adults while establishing narrowly defined policies, programs, and incentives designed to increase the alignment of systems and smooth out college and career pathways, especially at transition points between systems to accomplish specific objectives. Decision-making authority ultimately rests within each distinct system.
- **INTEGRATED:** State policy conditions enable and encourage separate and distinct systems to cocreate and administer integrated approaches and funding streams for college and career pathways. State policy establishes shared decision-making authority, as well as accountability and incentive structures, to measure and reward progress on Big Blur components but falls short of discouraging and dismantling the separate and distinct overarching systems serving youth and young adults.
- **TRANSFORMED:** State policy conditions dismantle separate and distinct systems serving youth and young adults and authorize and require the formation of a single fully integrated system and institutional type for serving youth and young adults along their college and career pathways, from grades 11-14, with a wholly new governance, funding, and staffing model.

In the framework, JFF provides examples of how each of the key components of the Big Blur (incentives, alignment, governance, and staffing) evolves from a fragmented to a fully transformed state policy environment. The examples are not an exhaustive list of policy issues to be addressed across the four components; rather, they provide a snapshot of some of the core areas commonly addressed across states.

## State Examples

To develop the framework, JFF consulted with thought leaders, innovators, advocates, and policymakers across the country about approaches moving in the direction of the Big Blur. In the appendix, we highlight state policies that exemplify momentum toward the blur. We applaud and celebrate these efforts. Yet, to be clear, none of these approaches has reached the transformational policy environment equated with the Big Blur. Much work still remains. Experience and evidence tell us that state policymakers must make a concerted effort to improve the policy conditions across all four Big Blur components to support learners in grades 11-14 effectively. Only through bold and aligned state action across the policy areas below can state policymakers actualize the Big Blur vision.

## How to Use the Framework

Readers can use the framework to assess their state and understand areas in the early stages of blurring and those that are further along. Given the multiple components of the Big Blur, states will likely have examples of policies across the continuum of policy environments. However, it's unlikely a state will find itself in a transformed policy environment since this represents achievement of a fully blurred system. Rather, the transformed column provides a benchmark against which states can measure their progress in driving state policy change toward the Big Blur vision.

## Keeping Up With Progress

JFF makes periodic updates to the framework to account for new insights and exemplars in policy and practice gathered from the field. We are always looking for strong examples of blurring in states and local areas. Please get in touch with us to share feedback and examples by emailing [blurinfo@jff.org](mailto:blurinfo@jff.org). Be sure to put "Big Blur" in the subject line.

### A Note About Employer Role

The Big Blur advocates for integrating three sectors—two public (K-12 and higher education) and one largely private (employers). Integration of this kind presents the greatest challenge and frustration to realizing the impact of the Big Blur. Neither employers nor educators have figured out how to work together to create the needed talent pipeline at a moment when both sectors would benefit from collaboration. For instance, while many community colleges and high schools recognize the value of work-based learning experiences, they continue to struggle to find ways to open such opportunities to their students or to structure curriculum pathways with adequate employer input.

Actualizing the Big Blur will require an entirely new approach to public-private partnership supported by the proper policy incentives. As a first step, the Big Blur adherents must build bridges across the divergent cultures and operating modes of public and private sectors, replacing short-term fixes with longer-term, deeper investments in worker development and success. The blur also requires sectors to try previously untested policy sets.

In the states that have made the most progress, governors or other political leaders have made the case to their business communities and the public that the state's economic future depends on a better-educated, more highly skilled workforce—one that the Big Blur can deliver.

# State Policy Framework

## Component 1

### Incentives

**Goal:** Incentives are structured to promote new ways of organizing learning and support systems across grades 11-14. The system(s) are held accountable for defined outcomes in this period, and current funding streams can be used flexibly and created as needed for systems serving students in these grades.

**What we're hearing from the field:** States recognize that putting the right incentives in place can serve as a major catalyst for blurring grades 11-14. Good metrics and data collection are essential for understanding student outcomes in grades 11-14 (including year-to-year persistence, work-based learning experiences, and employer partnerships) and for tailoring strategies to address equity gaps. And, because action usually follows money, incentives can spur greater collaboration and more robust support for students. However, progress in providing incentives for the blur is slow-moving due to longstanding silos in funding and data collection. Often K-12 and postsecondary data systems do not communicate with each other, and there is little alignment or integration with workforce data—without which it is challenging to establish an education-to-career accountability structure. And funding is tied to separate systems and an array of disparate models, including within the pathways space.

#### Component 1A: Incentives in Accountability

Illustrative Policy Environments	
<b><u>FRAGMENTED</u></b>	<p>To the extent state has set statewide requirements for high school graduation, these standards are separate and distinct from standards set by colleges to determine readiness for college-level courses.</p> <p>State may provide career readiness guidance but does not hold local education agencies (LEAs) accountable for quality implementation or student outcomes. Success is measured based on inputs (such as per-pupil spending) rather than student outcomes.</p>

<p><b><u>COORDINATED</u></b></p>	<p>State has a college and career readiness metric, which holds LEAs accountable for offering high school graduation pathways that prepare students for both college-oriented and career-oriented opportunities.</p>
<p><b><u>INTEGRATED</u></b></p>	<p>State holds LEAs accountable for college and career readiness as equally weighted and rigorous requirements for high school graduation (as evidenced through completion of dual enrollment courses and work-based learning experiences).</p> <p>State aligns high school graduation standards with “remediation-free” college readiness standards, resulting in automatic admission to college. These new high school graduation standards should incorporate core academics alongside competencies connected to employability skills and postsecondary readiness.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>In cases where multiple, distinct programs are authorized and funded, the state creates a single, streamlined reporting structure and standardized set of metrics for all postsecondary and workforce readiness programs to give a more meaningful comparison of program performance, costs, and return on investment. Metrics should include the attainment of quality, in-demand industry credential or postsecondary certificate; accumulation of college credits that attach to a defined pathway; and completion of relevant and meaningful work-based learning experiences.<sup>3</sup></p>
<p><b><u>TRANSFORMED</u></b></p>	<p>State education accountability for grades 11-14 is focused on outcomes, such as attainment of employment aligned with an industry-recognized credential. State accountability deprioritizes seat-time metrics and more heavily weighs transferrable skills learned through college and career preparedness opportunities. Outcomes metrics do not just focus on getting a job but rather getting a good job, measured through, among other ways, a wage metric that takes into account the median earnings at a regional level. All outcome data are disaggregated.</p> <p>Measures of student outcomes should also include an assessment of the quality and rigor of the content being taught.<sup>4</sup></p>



## Component 1B: Incentives in Data Systems

<b>Illustrative Policy Environments</b>	
<b><u>FRAGMENTED</u></b>	<p>State maintains separate and distinct systems for collecting and storing student education data and workforce data and expressly restricts sharing of data across systems.</p> <p>State does not disaggregate data on high school, college, or labor market outcomes nor does it publicly report on disparities by race, ethnicity, gender, and income. State only reports on students' labor market outcomes for programs bound to federal reporting requirements (for example, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins), Registered Apprenticeship).</p>
<b><u>COORDINATED</u></b>	<p>State maintains a K-12 through higher education data system and routinely conducts analysis of student progression and outcomes. This system does not connect to labor market data and is not routinely used for programmatic and policy improvements nor is it easily accessible to key stakeholders, such as practitioners, policymakers, and students and their families.</p>
<b><u>INTEGRATED</u></b>	<p>State maintains an integrated educational and workforce data system. Data systems are transparent and easy to understand (for example, data visualizations), and their availability is well publicized to all stakeholders and is used for collaborative cross-agency decision-making.</p>
<b><u>TRANSFORMED</u></b>	<p>State maintains a modern and connected educational and workforce data system that tracks young adults' workforce outcomes for at least six years after grade 14, including data on high school graduation rates, community college graduation rates, credential attainment, four-year degree completion rates, programs of study, and placement into related jobs/career fields and wages. Data system is user friendly, used to implement continuous improvement and inform cross-agency priorities</p>

	<p>and determine financial incentives, business investments, and other private investments (such as pay for success models).</p>
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**Component 1C: Incentives in Financing**

<p align="center"><b>Illustrative Policy Environments</b></p>	
<p><b><u>FRAGMENTED</u></b></p>	<p>State has separate funding streams for K-12, higher education, career and technical education, and apprenticeship and workforce development programs.</p> <p>No mechanisms exist, or states do not prioritize funding, to support students in early college or career experiences—for example, dual enrollment and work-based learning.</p>
<p><b><u>COORDINATED</u></b></p>	<p>State has a financing model for college and career pathways programs, which provides a cost-sharing agreement among districts and colleges for the delivery of dual enrollment or for their collaboration on career and technical education programs. Financing model makes a limited number of college-level courses tuition free for students.</p> <p>State rewards districts with a per-pupil bonus for high school students achieving college and career readiness standards.</p> <p>Higher education performance-based funding formula rewards colleges for outcomes achieved by high school students (for example, satisfactory completion of dual enrollment courses, completion of postsecondary credentials, and matriculation into a postsecondary program of study).</p> <p>State makes eligibility for funding for postsecondary and workforce readiness programs contingent upon establishing partnerships with at least one representative from secondary and postsecondary sectors.<sup>5</sup></p>

	<p>The state provides additional incentives to support the expansion of programs in systemically underserved areas of the state.<sup>6</sup></p> <p>State requires Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion for high school graduation and may have supports available to assist each student in filling out this form.</p>
<p><b><u>INTEGRATED</u></b></p>	<p>State braids funding so that districts and higher education institutions do not “lose money” if a student takes advantage of an early college opportunity; funding is maintained when a teacher instructs at both secondary and postsecondary levels.</p> <p>State rewards districts a per-pupil bonus for high school students who enroll in and complete postsecondary credentials and certificates directly tied to high-wage, high-demand pathways, among other postsecondary outcomes.</p> <p>State provides financing to facilitate and support partnerships between K-12 districts and community colleges to offer grade 13 programs, allowing students to obtain a tuition-free college degree in high school. Ideally, supports are provided to students from families with low incomes and systemically underserved communities to cover the costs of mandatory fees and for books and transportation.</p>
<p><b><u>TRANSFORMED</u></b></p>	<p>State provides new incentives for financing, such as extending the universal entitlement to education through grade 14, with dedicated funding streams for 16-to-20-year-olds. (Note in practice, this could include approaches like extending per-pupil funding for high school students to age 24 and braiding with other funding to ensure grades 13 and 14 are tuition and fee free, with free or reduced costs for food, transportation, etc.). Funding is weighted based on the learners who achieve outcomes, with additional weights for learners with identified risk factors.<sup>7</sup></p>

	<p>State funding systems reward institutions for changing the mechanisms for how students learn and shift from using seat time as an educational metric toward competency-based measures.<sup>8</sup></p>
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## Component 2

### Alignment

**Goal:** Systems are aligned so that when students reach 11th grade, they enter new institutional structures that combine programs—currently isolated by those in high school and those in college—designed to prepare them for careers and provide work experiences. These structures enable students to take incremental steps on a career pathway and result in credentials with labor market value by the end of 14th grade and the ability to progress in further education.

**What we’re hearing from the field:** Most states are not starting from scratch and acknowledge they can build on the pathways work they have underway. On the ground, however, implementers continue to struggle because the costly resources—human and material—needed to build high-quality pathways require dealing with credits versus Carnegie units, schedule and pay scale differences, high school exit tests that don’t align with entrance requirements, and the like. Additionally, work-based learning models—even intentionally designed—are isolated by opportunities provided in high school and in postsecondary, if at all.

### Component 2: Alignment

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Illustrative Policy Environments</b></p>	
<p><b><u>FRAGMENTED</u></b></p>	<p>State may offer multiple pathways to graduation as well as numerous opportunities to earn postsecondary credentials; however, these programs are disparate and administered separately.</p> <p>State has optional and sporadic inclusion of industry and/or employers with the K-12 school system (for example, business advisory councils for career and technical programs).</p>

	<p>State provides minimal supports (for example, financial aid, virtual opportunities, etc.) for students seeking access to high-quality postsecondary programs.</p>
<p><b><u>COORDINATED</u></b></p>	<p>State sets rules and standards for individual high schools to offer pathways for college in high school experiences, such as dual enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP), and/or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses.</p> <p>State authorizes and funds institutions that enroll students in a program of study that starts in high school and goes through the first two years of college (for example, state investments in early college high schools and P-TECHs).</p> <p>State convenes secondary and postsecondary education with workforce development entities to map career pathways, including sequences of credentials and degrees in high-demand, high-wage fields—but implementation of pathways is voluntary.</p> <p>State provides guidance and technical assistance to institutions to conduct prior learning assessments.</p> <p>State provides regional and statewide intermediary organizations with sufficient capacity and funding to play a role in developing and facilitating partnerships between education institutions and employers, including in development of pathways and delivery of work-based learning.</p>
<p><b><u>INTEGRATED</u></b></p>	<p>State requires guided pathways to reach back at least to 11th grade. This includes establishing default pathways for college in high school experiences that are categorized under career clusters—or meta majors—and include a recommended sequence of courses that articulate and transfer as credit toward postsecondary credential attainment in a field of study. LEAs and institutes of higher education would be required to opt out of implementation. Students are advised and supported in selecting a pathway.</p>

	<p>State has adopted an acceleration policy that guarantees students access to advanced coursework and postsecondary opportunities, enabling students to graduate with an industry-recognized postsecondary credential or some college credit.</p> <p>State supports high schools and their associated postsecondary and employer partners to design a set of courses that combine dual enrollment credit and work-based learning.<sup>9</sup></p>
<p><b><u>TRANSFORMED</u></b></p>	<p>State standardizes credits and aligns academic calendars and schedules for grades 11-14.</p> <p>State requires and funds development of grade 11-14 programs of study designed for students to obtain one or more industry-recognized credentials that prepare them for entry or advancement into a good first job and continued education at four-year programs of study. Programs integrate learning and work experiences at employer locations. These offerings are created with robust employer engagement, respond to labor market demand, and enable students to receive credit for their work-based and workplace learning experiences.</p> <p>State establishes various protocols and systems (assessments, on-ramps, etc.) that enable permeability and flexibility in pathways from industry certification to advanced degree.</p> <p>State requires work-based learning before completing grade 14, with a continuum of workplace experiences starting by grade 11 at the latest (with experiences required and intentionally sequenced through grades 11–14). Work-based learning experience is paid, students earn credit, and transportation costs are covered.</p> <p>State establishes a unified web-based platform for accessing a collection of tools and resources designed to help people of any age and at any point in their lives make informed choices about their educational, training, and employment options.<sup>10</sup> The platform should include the following features: (1) an online marketplace where learners seeking an experiential learning opportunity and businesses who want to bring in learners can connect; (2) a single source of truth on the full cost of</p>

	<p>attendance and returns on investments for participating in education and skills training programs; (3) incorporation of academic and career plans for students to articulate their interests, abilities, and goals; identify program options and eligibility requirements, and document and track their progress; (4) digital record of learning and employment records. These plans and learner and employment records should be easily accessible by staff and institutions supporting students along their college and career pathways.</p>
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### Component 3

## Governance

**Goal:** Governance structures at the state cabinet level include a team and/or an empowered secretary or commissioner with decision-making authority to oversee and ensure funding and support for unified grade 11-14 institutional structures aligned to a state's economic development strategy. The individual or team unifies policies promulgated by the offices of education, higher education, workforce, and economic development as they pertain to and influence the preparation of the state's future talent pipeline. Career-focused curriculum and work experiences are aligned and seamless, and the measure of success is student short- and longer-term labor market outcomes.

**What we're hearing from the field:** States acknowledge that governance structures rely heavily on current state leadership; this dynamic lends itself to a certain amount of fragility in relying solely on state politics to dictate governance. States are exploring the balance between improved governance that supports a Big Blur vision, as well as the benefits of outside pressure from businesses, workers, and learners for improved systems that better serve their needs.

### Component 3: Governance

<b>Illustrative Policy Environments</b>	
<b><u>FRAGMENTED</u></b>	<p>K-12, higher education, and workforce agencies remain siloed and have separate and discrete missions and funding streams. Agencies also lack employer input in educational programs.</p>
<b><u>COORDINATED</u></b>	<p>State fosters collaboration across systems by regularly convening secondary, postsecondary, and workforce leaders to discuss and strategize around a subset of efforts, such as meeting a state's postsecondary attainment goals (for example, PK-16/20 councils, dual enrollment taskforces, work-based learning, etc.).</p> <p>State assigns one agency, commissioner, or board responsibility for all the state's public education entities (P-12 through higher education); however, policies and programs remain siloed between K-12 and higher education.</p> <p>State convenes secondary, postsecondary, workforce agencies, and other relevant stakeholders for co-planning purposes to combine and align states' federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Perkins, and WIOA plans.</p> <p>State creates state and/or regional business advisory councils to engage employers in curriculum review, development, and co-delivery, including offering and designing work-based learning opportunities and informing programmatic offerings so that credentials are of value to employers.</p>
<b><u>INTEGRATED</u></b>	<p>State invests in a pilot program aiming to develop a unified governance and a deeper form of collaboration for educational and workforce efforts supporting 16-to-20-year-olds. The pilot could provide a newly dedicated stream of funds that requires a consortium of partners to work together and all be held accountable for the successful integration and alignment of the last two years of high school and the first two years of</p>



	<p>postsecondary to ensure that young people earn a postsecondary credential with value in the labor market by the time they turn 20.</p> <p>State requires departments of K-12, higher education, and workforce agencies to work together to develop and execute a tri-agency governance mechanism to oversee the state’s strategy for pathways development that align with in-demand high-growth industries and engage key stakeholders (including employers).</p>
<p><b><u>TRANSFORMED</u></b></p>	<p>State has a cabinet-level team (comprised of those from secondary, postsecondary, and workforce boards, industry students, guardians, members of community organizations, etc.) and/or empowered secretary or commissioner with decision-making authority who oversees, ensures funding for, and supports unified grade 11-14 institutional structures. This unified governance ensures a state/region’s approach to economic and workforce development is closely linked and aligned with education.</p> <p>Regional governing bodies are formed to formalize shared accountability for grades 11-14 between secondary, postsecondary, and workforce; these regional bodies are funded and accountable to the state.</p>

## Component 4

### Staffing

**Goal:** Staffing structures are designed to equip specially trained educators and leaders to teach, curate, and organize learning and work experiences and support systems for students in grades 11-14. Faculty members, administrators, and other school personnel are trained and certified to provide developmentally appropriate instruction and socio-emotional support for middle and late adolescents.

**What we’re hearing from the field:** States acknowledge that staffing is perhaps the most intractable of the four Big Blur components. However, states have made some progress in increasing the number of teachers credentialed to teach at both the secondary and postsecondary

levels. A small number of states and localities are mounting professional development programs for K-12 and higher ed instructors together to boost capacity to serve these grades.

### Component 4: Staffing

<b>Illustrative Policy Environments</b>	
<b><u>FRAGMENTED</u></b>	<p>State has separate certification and credentialing processes and union representation for educators and counselors across K-12, higher education, and training programs as well as disciplines. These processes do not consider unique student needs. Certification requirements may not allow shared educators.</p> <p>State has minimal counselors within a school district, and they do not focus on career navigation. The largest shortages are within the most distressed communities.</p>
<b><u>COORDINATED</u></b>	<p>State has a process that enables high school teachers to teach college courses (or vice versa) or industry experts to be able to teach high school and college students. State provides professional development opportunities for these teachers.</p> <p>State requires high school guidance counselors and college academic advisors to receive professional development in career counseling coaching to enhance career navigational function. This can include professional development on understanding labor market data and/or engaging with workforce and employer partners.</p>
<b><u>INTEGRATED</u></b>	<p>State has easy-to-navigate alternative certification policies for industry experts to teach, and high school and college programs share these teachers.</p> <p>State has articulation agreements between high schools and colleges to provide alternative certification for instructors to teach dual credit courses.</p>

	<p>State sets standards and provides sufficient resources and professional development to deploy college and career counselors embedded in high schools and success coaches embedded in college to support onboarding and early transitions.</p> <p>State takes advantage of braided funding opportunities to fully cover the cost of credentialing for secondary instructors to teach as adjunct faculty and even covers the cost of that new credentialing.</p> <p>State policies require collaboration between secondary and postsecondary teachers to ensure they have both subject matter expertise and pedagogy and andragogy to teach students ages 16 to 20.</p>
<p><b><u>TRANSFORMED</u></b></p>	<p>State establishes and funds educator credentialing programs that qualify current and future instructors to teach grades 11-14, with a focus on developing equal parts expertise in subject matter and pedagogy that is attuned to the developmental stage of young adults and the rigor required for satisfactory completion of a postsecondary program of study. Through their training, instructors acquire the skills to cultivate the social and emotional well-being and occupational identity of students and to help them build agency and their capacity for self-advocacy.<sup>11</sup></p> <p>State requires streamlined, high-quality, and sustained career and academic counseling through grade 14.</p> <p>State-accredited approved teacher certification processes enable industry experts to have the flexibility to teach relevant career-oriented skills and courses for grades 11-14 (including dual enrollment and career and technical education) and provide effective career counseling, coaching, and mentorship.</p> <p>State establishes compensation structures that reward teachers for engaging in forms of instruction that align with the Big Blur vision; this may include (1) scholarships or loan forgiveness for instructors to receive additional credentials that will allow them to teach grades 11-14; (2) additional compensation for teaching grades 11-14; (3) other incentives that encourage professional development so instructors remain up to</p>

	<p>date on industry certifications and credentials relevant to the discipline they are teaching.<sup>12</sup></p> <p>State establishes policy and funding mechanisms to deploy learning teams to support students in grades 11–14. These strategic staffing models should include classroom instructors, industry professionals, and college and career navigator.</p>
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## State Examples

The following state policies exemplify progress toward the Big Blur. None of these approaches has reached the transformational policy environment equated with the Big Blur.

### 1a. Incentives in Accountability

- Tennessee: Postsecondary Opportunities Rewarded in Accountability System—** Because ESSA encourages states to include dual and concurrent enrollment in their accountability plans, some 37 states now do so to some degree. One of the more comprehensive examples is Tennessee’s Ready Graduate Indicator. Ready Graduate data factor into the state’s early postsecondary opportunities (EPSO) framework as an “indicator of school quality and student success.” In addition, [Tennessee challenges districts](#) to develop “a robust portfolio of early postsecondary opportunities . . . [to help] ensure that college credit and/or a technical credential is accessible to all high school students.”<sup>13</sup> The EPSO framework includes eight such opportunities designed to accommodate a range of student interests, needs, postsecondary aspirations, and levels of prior academic performance. After the approval of Tennessee’s ESSA plan in August 2017, some quality and alignment issues emerged as districts moved quickly to expand EPSOs. The state put in place a certification process to recognize high-quality pathways that align with the Ready Graduate Indicator. Additional incentives for districts to provide high-quality EPSOs include state subsidies for test fees, course materials, and teacher professional development.

- Washington: State Legislation Mandates Student Acceleration**—After several years of discussion about ways to ensure that more students of color and more students from low-income backgrounds took advanced courses, the Washington legislature in 2019 passed a law requiring districts to enroll eligible students in these programs automatically. [Every student](#) “who meets or exceeds the state standard on the eighth grade or high school English language arts or mathematics statewide student assessment” would be enrolled in “the next most rigorous level of advanced courses or program offered by the high school that aligns with the student’s high school and beyond plan goals.”<sup>14</sup> The state budget includes \$9 million to fund this unique mandate in two-year increments. An analysis showed that [31 of the 50 participating districts](#) had either reached parity—or made significant progress toward parity—in the demographics of the students in dual credit courses.<sup>15</sup> Similar legislation is under discussion or in the pilot phase in Colorado, Connecticut, and Illinois.

## 1b. Incentives in Finance

- Idaho: Financing Students Directly and Early as an Incentive to Make Postsecondary Plans**—Idaho has created a scholarship program, [Advanced Opportunities](#) (AO), to encourage students to take advantage of a range of post-high school advancement opportunities.<sup>16</sup> When students reach seventh grade, they receive a stipend of \$4,125 to use for education-related expenses, including state-approved college courses, AP and IB exams, professional certification fees, and career and technical education (CTE) courses and apprenticeships. Most students use the money to pay for college courses taught by qualified high school teachers that cost \$75 per credit. As the program grew in popularity, the state legislature empowered students to create their own Advanced Opportunities accounts and learning plans (which are required for participation). The scholarship holds students accountable for outcomes. If a student fails to earn credit in a course, they must pay for a “like” course before being permitted to use further scholarship dollars. Though education savings accounts and direct student funding are not unique unto themselves, Idaho’s program is set up to combat negative competition for funds between higher education and K-12 agencies. AO offers incentives for all parties to encourage credit accrual and early graduation by divvying up the dollar amount given to schools for each student: Early graduates receive 35% of that year’s average daily attendance costs to cover postsecondary tuition and fees; K-12 districts are held harmless for student nonattendance by receiving 35% ADA (or backfilled partial funding); 30% is returned to the state as savings; and institutions of higher education and training providers benefit by receiving tuition payments from program participants. This ensures that no one “loses,” and students have fewer out-of-pocket costs.<sup>17</sup>
- Colorado: Incentive Funding for College and Career Readiness**—The Career Development Incentive Program (CDIP) provides financial motivation for school districts and charter schools to encourage their students in grades 9-12 to complete industry-related

credentials, college credits, or AP classes. This can include internships, residency or construction pre-apprenticeship, or other apprenticeship programs related to jobs identified in the Colorado talent pipeline report or other high-demand industries. A 2023 bill, [SB23-065](#), would increase funding for the program from \$1 million to about \$5 million annually to support the demand for the programming and ensure school districts receive the full financial benefits of the program.<sup>18</sup> As of May 8, 2023, the legislation passed out of both the Senate and the House and is awaiting the governor's signature.

In 2021, the [Path4Ward](#) pilot program was established by SB21-106.<sup>19</sup> Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who graduate early get funding for postsecondary education or career training programs during their fourth year of high school. These programs include enrollment in college, internships, or apprenticeships to offer incentives for students to graduate high school early. Students will receive funds dependent on which semester they graduate. For example, if they graduate before their fourth year begins, the student will receive 75% of the average state share of per-pupil revenue or \$3,500 (whichever amount is greater). If they graduate before the second semester of their fourth year, they will receive \$2,000 or 45% of the average state share of per-pupil revenue (whichever is greater.) The money can be used to pay college or class tuition fees, and any unspent funds can be used for other qualifying expenditures relating to school or apprenticeship fees and transportation. The pilot program is set to last five years with five participating schools or groups of schools from a mix of urban, suburban, and rural districts. Each school receives 25% of the average state share of per-pupil revenue for each student enrolled in the program. Path4Ward not only provides financial incentives to early high school graduates for continuing onto postsecondary education and training, but it also rewards LEPs by backfilling what would have been LEP's "lost" per-pupil revenue due to early graduates. This means that Path4Ward students receive a portion of what the state would have paid an LEP to educate them in high school, and students can use those funds toward workforce readiness. Participating Path4Ward schools are granted 25% of the average state share of per-student funding for each early graduate.<sup>20</sup>

- **Illinois: Financing Students Enrolled in Dual Enrollment Courses**—In 2023, the Illinois General Assembly passed [HB2593](#), which amends the Higher Education Student Assistance Act.<sup>21</sup> Because of this bill, the state will provide grants to students who are enrolled in dual credit classes as long as there is a partnership agreement between the home school district and a community college and the student filled out the FAFSA form. The grant will cover the tuition costs and any additional fees required for the course. The bill passed in March 2023 and went into immediate effect, so successes or remaining barriers have not yet been evaluated.
- **Texas: Community College Outcomes-Based Funding System**—In 2023, the Texas legislature passed House Bill 8 (HB 8), establishing a new community college outcomes-based financing model focused on rewarding institutions for producing graduates prepared

for jobs that align with regional and state educational and workforce needs. Known as the Community College Financing Program, the financing model is broken down into two core tiers: base-tier funding that every college receives to support core college functions and an outcomes-based tier focused on how well a college prepares students for the workforce. Both the base and outcomes-based tiers award colleges for the number of “academically disadvantaged students” (defined as students who are not considered [Texas Success Initiative-ready](#) in any subject area), “economically disadvantaged students” (defined as Pell Grant recipients), and adult learners (those 25 years and older) a college serves by providing additional weights, or funds, to colleges for serving those students.<sup>22</sup> The outcomes-based tier is based on student outcomes that align with Texas’s strategic plan for higher education, Building a Talent Strong Texas. Specifically, colleges will receive additional outcomes-based funding based on 1) the number of high school students who successfully complete 15 dual credit hours that apply toward an academic or workforce program, 2) the number of students who successfully transfer 15 credit hours from community colleges to four-year universities, and 3) the number of credentials of value awarded that position learners for high-demand career fields. Community colleges now have an incentive to connect with their school district partners to offer dual enrollment, whereas previously, the incentive was primarily directed at school districts through House Bill 3 (K-12 finance bill), which provides school districts with funding reimbursements for students earning industry-based credentials. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s website, high-demand career fields are identified based on data from the Texas Workforce Commission and include a list of 25 occupations that provide at least a minimum wage, require education and training beyond high school but below a bachelor’s degree, and are projected to grow across the state’s 10 higher education regions. Additionally, HB 8 includes provisions that ensure no Texas community college will lose funding as institutions transition to this new funding model nor will smaller colleges be penalized for the smaller number of positive student outcomes relative to larger schools.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Alignment

- Indiana: Students Can Earn 30 Hours of Transferable College Credit in High School**—A program called [Indiana College Core](#) offers high school students a block of 30 hours of general education credits that transfer to public colleges and universities.<sup>24</sup> College Core students participate in dual credit courses taught at a high school by high school teachers through a formal partnership between the high school and a college. The number of high school students earning College Core credits grew from 11 in 2013 to more than 1,600 in 2019. However, while the program is promising, Indiana is now addressing capacity and implementation challenges. Only 20% of the state’s high schools offer the College Core, and most of the participants in the program are white students from households with higher

incomes. Through Senate Enrolled Act No. 8, passed in 2024, every high school is now required to offer the Indiana College Core to its students, with some exceptions. The law also requires the Indiana Department of Education to make an online version of each course available to students statewide.

- Illinois: Default Pathways**—The [Postsecondary & Workforce Readiness Act](#) (PWR), signed into Illinois law in 2016, takes a student- and competency-based approach in its college and career pathway endorsement framework.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the [Illinois Essential Employability Skills Framework](#) defines essential employability skills and provides statewide standards for success to align education and workforce needs.<sup>26</sup> The Illinois [Model Programs of Study Guides](#) provide information on the labor market, credential programs, and secondary, postsecondary, and employer stakeholders on specific career pathways.<sup>27</sup> Through the enactment of [Public Law 102-0917](#) in 2022, the state amended the PWR Act to reinforce as the default expectation that all districts adopt and implement career exploration and development activities for all students enrolled in grades 6-12.<sup>28</sup> All of these activities must align with the framework established in the original act and must prepare students “to make informed plans and decisions about their future education and career goals, including possible participation in a career and technical education pathway, by providing students with opportunities to explore a wide variety of high-skill, high-wage, and in-demand career fields.” For more information, see this [primer](#) from Education Systems Center.<sup>29</sup>
- Colorado: Financing a 13th Year of High School**—Colorado has a grade 13 high school program called Accelerating Students through Concurrent Enrollment (ASCENT). It gives K-12 districts and community colleges an incentive to set up grade 13 programs by allowing them to apply for funds that cover college tuition—the factor that often discourages schools from offering dual enrollment. To participate, students must have completed at least nine college credits before the end of 12th grade, and they must be eligible for credit-bearing, nonremedial college coursework. Participation is still low: Grade 13 programs could appeal to other states interested in building streamlined and coordinated secondary-to-postsecondary pathways because they offer a financial mechanism that would fund or partially fund a full college degree in high school.
- Louisiana: Piloting a 13th Year of High School**—Louisiana took similar action as Colorado in enacting the [Extension Academy](#) pilot program to help students earn postsecondary credits, gain experience through work-based learning, and even attain an associate’s degree, Registered Apprenticeship, or advanced industry-based credential at no cost to students.<sup>30</sup> LEAs receive incentives to participate in Extension Academies because the policy enables them to include fifth-year students in annual enrollment counts toward expenses and costs reported back to the state.



- Ohio: Business Advisory Council**—[Ohio Revised Code section 3313.82](#) requires every school district, including joint vocational school districts and educational service centers, to have a business advisory council, with the goal of helping build relationships between businesses and schools.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, [state statute](#) directs the superintendent of public instruction, in consultation with the governor’s executive workforce board, to develop standards for the operation of business advisory councils established by the boards of education of school districts, boards of education of joint vocational school districts, or governing boards of educational service centers throughout the state.<sup>32</sup> The Montgomery County Education Service Center is among five educational institutions that earned a four-star rating in 2023 for excellence in business advisory council activities due to its efforts to map out pathways from high school to college to career in three high-demand sectors of the regional economy. Read [this case study](#) for more information.<sup>33</sup>
- Colorado: Opportunity Now**—Established by HB22-1350 in 2022, Opportunity Now Colorado used \$85 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to establish new and expand existing regional workforce talent development initiatives across the state.<sup>34</sup> Each grant application requires the inclusion of one or more industry partners and at least one training, education, or community partner. Governor Jared Polis hopes that by offering incentives to encourage relationship building between education and workforce sectors, a more reliably successful talent pipeline will emerge and flourish, ultimately increasing the number of Coloradans with credentials of value in positions with sustaining wages. The grant is split up into distinct phases of implementation, during which program leaders may apply to three different grant tracks—planning, seed, and scale —depending on where their program is in implementation. To access Opportunity Now funds, employers must submit an application on which they: identify and demonstrate how their program will respond to regional workforce needs and shortages in their industry; ensure collaboration is at the center of their work by including members from industry, training, and education sectors in the design and implementation of the proposed program; and build an innovative program model in which they clearly articulate the specific inputs, activities, and desired outcomes of the proposed program.
- Tennessee: The SySTEM grant**—Developed in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Education and funded via an Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grant through the U.S. Department of Education, this supports Tennessee public high schools and their associated postsecondary and employer partners in designing dual enrollment work-based courses to support better the advancement of Black and Latine students, students experiencing poverty, and female students of all backgrounds in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and computer science.<sup>35</sup> Dual enrollment work-based courses are taught through applied learning that uses the workplace as a “learning lab,” enabling students to simultaneously experience college-level courses, gain credit, and practice workplace skills that may prepare them for STEM and computer science programs and

careers. Instructors and employers co-plan and co-teach course content, which creates a seamless learning environment between the classroom and the workplace for students.

- Delaware: Tech School Career Pathways Project**—The Delaware Department of Education and Rodel have jointly developed the Tech School Career Pathways Project, the first program to expand postsecondary offerings for high school students through apprenticeships and dual enrollment courses matched to the state’s career pathways industries.<sup>36</sup> The goal is to provide these experiences to students before high school graduation so they can verify a career interest to pursue after high school and enter a postsecondary program with credits and/or work experience. Now, a young person at a Delaware vocational-technical school will be connected to a form of postsecondary attainment—academic coursework and/or apprenticeship experience—that matches their college and career passion. The project will also bring together the state’s three vocational-technical high schools, higher education institutions, and the Delaware Departments of Education and Labor. Many of these partners already share similar visions for economic development and education, and this project provides an opportunity to turn vision into action. Secondary and adult career and technical education programs are now extremely intertwined within the vocational-technical schools, utilizing the same instructors and infrastructure. The model will use the state’s strong pathways infrastructure and partnerships, as well as two opportunities for tuition-free college: Student Excellence Equals Degree (a free tuition program at Delaware Tech) and the Inspire Scholarship (four-year tuition coverage for qualifying in-state high school graduates who enroll at Delaware State University in the fall semester following graduation). Students may access those funds to support their engagement in the program.

### 3. Governance

- Texas: Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative**—In 2016, Texas Governor Greg Abbott established the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative to help boost Texas’ economy by increasing postsecondary completion rates and workforce readiness by bringing together commissioners from three state agencies—Texas Education Agency, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission. In 2020, Abbott tasked the group with developing strategies for addressing Texas’ workforce needs, and in 2021, the Texas legislature passed the [Texas Education and Workforce Alignment Act](#), or House Bill 3767, to formally codify the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative and identify specific measures to align Texas’ education and workforce development efforts.<sup>37</sup> To date, the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative has had collaborative successes, including the development of a strategic framework for work-based learning focused on scaling and improving the quality of

work-based learning across the state. The [framework](#) provides “program implementation, quality assurances, accountability, and support mechanisms for program providers, including streamlined data collection, cross-sector partnerships, and funding options.”<sup>38</sup> The tri-agencies are also collaborating on a statewide grant opportunity that would support the establishment of Tri-Agency regional conveners across Texas’ core workforce regions to bring together core partners across education, workforce, and community-based organizations to support effective regional pathway approaches for young adults.

- **Massachusetts: Early College Joint Committee (ECJC)**—In 2017, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and the Board of Higher Education (BHE) developed a joint resolution recognizing the importance that early college programs can play in improving educational attainment rates across the state, particularly for students of color and students from families with low incomes. The resolution also established the ECJC, which comprises two voting members from the BESE and BHE, as well as the state secretary of education (who is appointed by the governor). The commissioners of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Department of Higher Education also sit on the ECJC but do not vote, and each has a senior staff member devoted to early college work. The ECJC demonstrates a deeper form of collaborative governance because the group meets regularly and co-governs Massachusetts’ Early College Initiative by jointly setting policy and rules governing the structure of the initiative, including working together to determine the criteria and approval processes for early college applicants and making collective decisions on the use of the state’s early college funding. At this writing, the ECJC is also carrying out a strategic policy review of Massachusetts’ Early College Initiative, addressing six main topic areas (designation, program quality and accountability, data, governance and staffing, funding, and supportive ecosystem). Members of the legislature and advocates, including the Massachusetts Alliance for Early College, have introduced and supported a bill to codify early college in state law, including through the continuation of strong cross-agency collaboration and governance.
- **North Carolina: Cooperative Innovative High School (CIHS)**—In 2004, North Carolina’s General Assembly established CIHSs, which are public high schools located on a community college or university campus that target students at risk of not graduating, first-generation college students, and students who would benefit from accelerated learning. Local boards of education and a local college (typically a community college) must jointly apply to develop a CIHS and, if accepted, develop a memorandum of understanding to solidify their working relationship. CIHSs are a part of the local school district and supported by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (K-12 agency). The community college partner is a part of the North Carolina Community College System. Both partners receive incentives to ensure the success of student participants because all districts and state education agencies report data on student enrollment, high school graduation, and college certifications and degrees, with completion as a major goal for all. The two parties also share a set of resources, which

typically includes a college liaison whose responsibilities involve supporting CIHS students in collaboration with CIHS leaders and counselors, as well as navigating and strengthening the relationship between the district and college partner. Funds used for this position come from supplemental funding CIHSs receive from the North Carolina General Assembly (funds that are in addition to standard state K-12 funds).

Additionally, the state law establishing the CIHS initiative also puts into place a Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) that oversees the CIHSs. The JAC has staff members from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina Community College System, University of North Carolina System, and the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities. The [JAC](#) differs from many P-16/20 councils because it is codified in law and meets regularly and collaborates “to support CIHS throughout the year and to provide oversight and guidance to the program, including technical support, resource development, policy implementation and data collection and analysis.”<sup>39</sup> Each participating entity contributes a unique set of resources or supports depending on the needs of the CIHSs. Ultimately, the JAC provides a setting for leaders across North Carolina’s key education systems to meet and collectively ensure the success of the CIHS.

- Colorado: Secondary, Postsecondary and Work-Based Learning Integration Task Force**—Established by the state legislature, the task force produced [policy recommendations](#) to systematically innovative programs and models to enable widespread blurring.<sup>40</sup> In response, in 2024, the state legislature, in collaboration with the governor’s office, Colorado Department of Education, and advocacy organizations, passed [HB24-1364](#) to undertake a study to understand the actual costs and opportunities for savings among the vast array of existing career-connected learning programs funded by the state.<sup>41</sup> The cost study is scheduled to be complete by November 2024 and will allow Colorado to put forward a proposal to equitably expand these opportunities in a fiscally responsible way.<sup>42</sup> In addition, through the legislation, Colorado is establishing a state longitudinal data system to connect K-12, postsecondary, and workforce data and to be administered by the State Office of Information Technology and advised by an interagency governing board.
- Delaware: Work-Based Learning Intermediary Function**—The [Delaware Office of Work-Based Learning](#) (housed at [Delaware Technical Community College](#)) serves as an intermediary between employers, schools, and community-based organizations to support the economic advancement of students, a mechanism that did not exist before.<sup>43</sup> The goals of Delaware Pathways guide this office and provide cohesive guidance for how partners should work together.<sup>44</sup> As an intermediary for the state, the office is available to all public schools and postsecondary institutions and operates “like a concierge service,” delivering schools the ability to offer the career-connected learning experiences students need. The office’s intermediary function navigates traditional silos by facilitating partnerships and

connecting students with all stakeholders, who come together to support their needs. The office is supported through multiple funding streams, including state and philanthropic dollars.

- Delaware: Unified Federal Plans**—Delaware is one of only a handful of states that has a combined Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) plan that builds in continued cross-agency collaboration and reinforces intertwined accountability metrics.<sup>45</sup> Delaware takes this a step further by embracing the flexibility Perkins V provides states in choosing at least one secondary program quality indicator and determining how to measure “quality.” In its combined state plan, Delaware did more than the minimum requirement and chose multiple indicators reiterating secondary and postsecondary education should not operate in silos. The cross-cutting reporting metrics include postsecondary credit attainment, work-based learning participation, and attainment of a recognized postsecondary credential. Multiple Delaware governors have viewed combining these plans as essential to coordinating statewide education and economic endeavors. This has helped reinforce collaboration from middle grades through the workforce and moved the state from parallel goals to integrated quality indicators across programs.

## 4. Staffing

- Texas: Professional Development for Dual Enrollment Teachers**—Texas has implemented a handful of initiatives to support instructors and education leaders who work in programs for students at the transition points between high school, college, and career. One interesting example is the [University of Texas at Austin’s OnRamps](#) initiative, which offers dual enrollment courses for high school students and professional development supports for the instructors who teach those classes.<sup>46</sup> Established in 2011, OnRamps prepares high school dual enrollment teachers to teach college classes to high school students. Instructors teaching their first OnRamps courses can participate in intensive summer training and mentoring programs and attend virtual conferences and learning institutes. While this is unique to an independent institution, policy can provide incentives to adopt this type of strategy.
- Hawaii: Alternative Certification for Career and Technical Education Licensure Program**—Leeward Community College offers this program to support industry professionals in getting fully licensed to teach in K-12 classrooms in Hawaii.<sup>47</sup> These professionals must have either a bachelor’s degree and three years of experience in their career field or an associate’s degree and five years of experience to be eligible to participate.

Over the course of three or four semesters, the industry professionals take three foundational pedagogy courses in classroom management, inclusion, and educational psychology. That is followed by a semester of classroom observation and participation and then a full-time semester of student teaching. Upon their successful completion of the course, participants are recommended for licensure by the Hawaii Teachers Standards Board.

- **Colorado: Sturm Collaboration Campus**—A partnership between Arapahoe Community College, the Douglas County School District, and the Colorado State University (CSU) system, the initiative provides a seamless set of programming for students, from high school through completion of a bachelor’s degree, that builds in career exposure and work-based learning experiences.<sup>48</sup> Arapahoe Community College has also been working on co-hiring instructors from the school district who can teach high school, dual enrollment, and community college courses, either in the schools or on the college campus. Among these roles is a concurrent enrollment specialist, who moves between Douglas County School District high schools and Sturm to support dually enrolled students and help align courses to pathways that will transfer to Arapahoe Community College and/or CSU. In addition, career navigators hired by Sturm do an in-depth intake with students, including a career assessment; walk them through the My Colorado Journey work, education, and support services tool; and align their skills and goals with career opportunities. Also, there are school district navigators who work for the school district but are housed at Sturm to work closely with both the career navigators and the concurrent enrollment specialist.
- **Tennessee: Occupational Educator Licensure**—Tennessee has two types of teacher licenses—one for an academic teacher and the other for an occupational teacher. While the academic licensure refers to academic content areas and special education, the occupational license endorses occupational content, meaning areas that prepare for career and technical education programs. Essentially, this allows for industry experts to become licensed to teach in the associated subjects with the time in the field and/or industry certification counting toward a teaching license. This flexibility takes a piece of the burden off industry experts and increases the willingness to teach. Because of the current teaching shortages, this is an especially appealing strategy.
- **Arizona: Co-Advising Framework**—The Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA), a statewide intermediary, plays a leading role in developing shared advising models and common tech platforms across K-12 and postsecondary programs to help high school students make smoother transitions to college and accelerate their entry into high-quality career fields. Using a five-year federal grant award for the Education Innovation and Research program, CFA led the development and implementation of a “co-advising framework.” In partnership with 15 high schools and four community college systems, CFA

piloted a distributive advising approach that emphasizes shared responsibility for students. Advisors and staff members use the same framework and guidance as they support seamless transitions for students from high school to college and career. The focus is on increasing dual enrollment participation rates and the percentage of students prepared for career success.

- **Ohio: Career-Technical Licensure**—The Ohio Department of Education developed a guide for district administrators to navigate the unique requirements to teach career and technical education programs. This includes detailed steps in evaluating and verifying work experience, including self-employment. This guide then outlines how to equate professional years to what is needed from a high-quality instructor. This is a promising practice to recruit industry experts to teach. Policy can standardize and formalize this guide.

# Endnotes

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