

CAREER PATHWAYS' AMERICAN MOMENT

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Young people in the US face a complex and evolving world. They have grown up through a global pandemic, major climate shifts and significant social unrest. Our schools and employers are responding by reimagining the path to adulthood—a once-in-a-century transformation of how we launch young people into the world. Although this effort, often called “career pathways,” can help connect young people to good jobs, it’s also bigger than that: it’s about helping them figure out where they fit and how to make informed choices about their futures so that they become thriving adults.

We’ve seen this kind of change before. In 1910, just 7 percent of Americans had a high school diploma. By 1940, the figure was approaching 70 percent. The package of reforms that made the difference was known as the “high school movement,” which made high school a public good, readily available and open to all. In an era when secondary education was generally reserved for the elite, the US created the best-educated workforce in the world and kept that lead for much of the 20th century.

Today, many countries have caught up or passed us, and the gap between rich and poor is growing. We need to level the playing field and improve our game. By 2027, economists project that 70 percent of family-sustaining US careers will require a degree or certification beyond

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high school. In essence, the bar has been raised from 12 years of education in the 20th century to closer to 14 in the 21st.

What’s needed starts with more schooling, but we also need to do more to meld the worlds of school and work and give young people more agency over what, where, how and when they learn. This is the essence of career pathways, and if done right, it can be a historic shift.

The US is in the midst of what the education nonprofit Jobs for the Future calls a “big blur” between school and work. It looks different in every state, but growing numbers of high school students are gaining meaningful work experience through internships or job shadowing and completing college coursework or certifications before they turn 18. These work-and-learn pathways are often aligned with growing industries like health care or IT. In some ways, they resemble traditional vocational education, but they are also different because the new pathways are meant for all kids, regardless of what they plan to do after high school. The intention is not to

lock young people into a career choice at age 14 but rather to help them make better decisions about their futures by exposing them to the world of work and giving them a start on training they may need when they graduate.

The opportunity looks different for every learner. For one Delaware student, pathways meant following his passion for tech, becoming a certified Cisco systems technician and getting consulting gigs while in high school. For another, it meant working on the school's farm in an agriscience pathway and producing food for the school culinary program. His goal in college was not to learn farming, but rather to study how farming affects climate change. For a student working in a hospitality pathway, interning at a local hotel was a way to improve her people skills before heading to medical school. Pathways are a customizable vehicle to help young people get a leg up on their futures and make better career choices.

The push to connect high school students to the world of work is happening all over the country, in red states and blue. In Delaware, the pathways movement has grown from 27 students in 2015 to 26,000 in 2022, more than 60 percent of the state's high schoolers. From Texas to Tennessee and California to Louisiana, we're seeing similar interest and a range of strategies from job shadowing to apprenticeships, all intended to close the gap between education and employment. In our polarized political world, this is a rare island of bipartisan collaboration.

What's driving this rapid growth?

Career and technical education isn't new, but the career pathways movement has been gaining steam for a decade or so. Two influential 2010 reports by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development, *Learning for Jobs* and *Off to a Good Start? Jobs for Youth*, revealed that students in countries like Switzerland and Germany with strong vocational education and training were transitioning to careers more seamlessly than their peers in

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other countries. In 2011 Robert Schwartz and his colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education produced a groundbreaking report, *Pathways to Prosperity*, challenging the notion of "college for all." In 2012, Schwartz partnered with Jobs for the Future to launch a Pathways to Prosperity state network that enabled states interested in the new approach, including Delaware, to expand their thinking and learn from each other.

What's driving this rapid growth? Unlike some other education reforms, such as raising academic standards or improving the measurement of student achievement, pathways are easy to explain. The value proposition is clear and concrete. They deliver a direct benefit for students, and they work, driving better educational and career outcomes.

Parents want their kids to "launch" successfully and find a fulfilling career that generates family-sustaining wages. College is expensive; dropping out with debt can set students back for decades. Pathways not only enable young people to earn up to a year's worth of college credit or a nationally recognized credential; students also learn through work and can explore a profession before committing.

High school, particularly senior year, can be a boring grind, and many students would rather spend that year exploring a potential career, especially if they can also earn college credit or a certification or draw a paycheck while pursuing their education. Engaging young people in meaningful work can also help address the complaint often heard from employers that young people lack what America Achieves calls "durable skills," such as working with others, listening and communicating. Pathways give young

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people a head start on school, a chance to learn essential skills and an opportunity to start thinking about what they want from a career.

Pathways make good business sense, too. In today's tight labor market, employers are eager to find and keep good people, and building relationships with students can help create a stronger, more inclusive talent pipeline. European scholars studying apprenticeships have found that some employers are initially concerned that young people hired in their teens know nothing about the business and contribute little. But over time, the same employers came to recognize that their investment was paying off with increased retention, reduced retraining costs and a stronger company culture.

The pandemic sharply accelerated the pathways approach. Covid-19 exacerbated existing inequities as soaring unemployment hurt youth more than adults, and women and young people of color fared worse than their white male counterparts. Young Americans, many of them still feeling the impact of the economic collapse of 2009, saw unemployment double from 10 percent in 2019 to roughly 20 percent in 2021. This unprecedented crisis galvanized the public and private sectors, underscoring the need to get young people trained and into good jobs. Billions of federal recovery dollars were invested in workforce training, and private foundations gave millions more to strengthen work-based learning.

Technology is changing. New jobs are emerging, and employers need new sources of talent. Even before the "Big Quit," baby boomers were retiring more rapidly than new employees could replace them. With a smaller pool of potential candidates and unemployment rates

below 4 percent nationally, employers are working harder to engage a more inclusive talent pipeline. Companies are partnering with high schools and colleges to open early college high schools and launching apprenticeship programs in industries such as IT and education. Still other firms have expanded their search for talent to groups once on the sidelines, including neurodiverse individuals or the formerly incarcerated.

The path to success is also changing, and there are many more options than in the past. A four-year degree, while still valuable, is increasingly just one route among many. There's growing demand for so-called "middle-skill" jobs that require more than a high school education but less than a four-year college degree—jobs in fields like health care and advanced manufacturing that often pay well and offer strong opportunities for growth.

Many employers are less concerned about how long a candidate has studied than about what he or she knows how to do. Credential Engine reports that there are more than 950,000 credentials—degrees, academic certificates, third-party certifications, licenses, badges and other awards—now available to students. Many take less than a year to attain, and a good number are "stackable" as individuals move up their career ladder. For example, a high school student can become a certified nursing assistant, then generate an income while studying to become a physician's assistant.

Incentives for high schools are also changing. Parents and students want policymakers to make it easier for students to attain postsecondary training before they complete 12th grade. From 2003 to 2011, the percentage of high school graduates completing a college-level course increased 68 percent. As of 2021, the Education Commission of the States reports that 70 percent of all US school districts offer "dual enrollment" in high school and college, and state legislatures are debating some 200 bills to expand high schoolers' access to postsecondary training. In Delaware, pathways are now the largest provider of dual enrollment credit.

It's rare to see institutional incentives align with what's good for kids, but that's what appears to be happening.

Potential pitfalls

As with any good idea, there are potential pitfalls. First, if we're not careful, pathways can exacerbate socioeconomic gaps. Strong guidance, good data systems and clear accountability are needed so students of color and low-income students don't end up disproportionately in lower-skill, lower-wage pathways.

Second, some students may need help to get to in-person classes or work-based learning opportunities. Although digital training is getting better, there's still a place for in-person learning, especially in hands-on technical fields. Transportation is often lacking in rural communities, but access can be a problem anywhere. Some students also need wraparound supports—from coaching and mentoring to housing assistance—to make the most of the opportunities available.

Some schools have addressed transportation problems by building training options—perhaps working farms or early learning centers—on-site. Others devote additional resources to counseling and provide wraparound supports at wellness centers. Access, broadly defined, is critical for equity.

Third, employers need help building capacity to accommodate high school students on-site at scale. Many employers are hesitant to hire high school students for liability reasons; others have scant workplace experience with this age group. Nonprofit organizations and other intermediaries can help connect the dots between employers and schools.

What's important is that employers understand that engaging young people in the world of work isn't just doing good. It's essential for their businesses—the best way to build the talent pipelines of the future. It's a job for the human resources division of the business, not the community relations arm. And regional

employers must come together in industry councils that work with educators to codesign technical course content, build relationships with job candidates and craft stronger data systems so that investments are translated into sound training and good jobs.

How can policy help us make the most of this moment?

Policymakers can help by coordinating across agencies and party lines. This is one of the few issues about which Republicans and Democrats can agree. At the state and federal levels, the Departments of Labor, Education, Health and Human Services and Commerce can support practitioners by coordinating strategy, aligning on data, and consolidating the guidance they offer. The Biden administration seemed to prioritize collaboration of this kind in its FY23 budget, but there's more to be done.

Policymakers and philanthropists can help us all think big by setting ambitious goals—North Stars for the nation. What would it take, for example, to increase apprenticeships fivefold? Today there are just shy of 600,000 registered apprentices in the US. The Urban Institute's Robert Lerman notes that if we could create as many apprenticeships as a share of our labor force as Britain, Australia and Canada have, that number would climb to around four million. We should also build more bridges to learn from other countries that are doing this well and can help us accelerate our learning.

We must also rethink federal investment to better reflect the needs of students and employers. Despite strong evidence that many good jobs do not require a four-year degree and that only about one-third of Americans attain a bachelor's degree, federal funding favors bachelor's degree attainment seven to one over other types of postsecondary education and training.

In 2016, according to Will Marshall of the Progressive Policy Institute, Washington spent more than \$139 billion on postsecondary education, including loans, grants and other financial

aid for students. Of that, just \$19 billion went toward occupational education and training. Shifting this balance toward occupational education would level the playing field for high school students and provide a lifeline for millions of mid-career adults looking to reskill or upskill to keep up with the changing economy.

There is also much to be done at the state level by employers, educators, advocates and policymakers.

Start earlier. No one thinks we should be asking 14-year-olds to choose a life path, but that's not too soon to start exploring potential careers. Ninth grade can be too late if a child doesn't choose a high school with the courses they need to pursue their career interests.

Middle schoolers can begin by learning interpersonal workplace skills, expanding their thinking of what's possible and exploring how their educational decisions link to their imagined futures. It's hard to aspire to what you don't know exists.

Make it simpler. Many students struggle to navigate the education system and attain the training they need. It can be hard to find appropriate secondary and postsecondary programs and difficult to transfer among institutions. Student-to-counselor ratios are often several hundred to one.

What's needed is more customized support and information on scholarships, course offerings and career paths—information easily accessible to counselors and students alike. Also essential is equity of work-based learning placements, starting with paid internships for young people who can't afford to volunteer their time to get trained.

Engage business in co-ownership and design. Without employer engagement, pathways will fade away. Philanthropy is inherently fickle. Employers won't make sustained investments unless they promise real, tangible benefits for the company's bottom line. What's needed are

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industry councils and partnerships that better connect employers and educators so this becomes part of the fabric of what we do.

An American opportunity

Employers and educators across America are waking up to the promise of career pathways, but we still lag behind many other countries in Europe and Asia. Switzerland, Germany and Singapore have more experience with earn-and-learn programs and have built enduring relationships with employers. More than half of Swiss students are enrolled in apprenticeship programs, and they can explore some 230 pathways.

But the US has many advantages to draw on as we work to catch up with international trends. We are a large, diverse country with a decentralized education system that generates new ideas. The Constitution pushes innovation down to the states, allowing us to leverage and learn from 50 state-level experiments. And our legislative history compels us to disaggregate data and design for equity based on income, race and ability, helping us improve the education we offer and provide it more fairly. What's needed now is a national conversation about how to marshal these advantages to reinvent our secondary and postsecondary education systems and provide all young people with a fair shot at a good life and a meaningful career.

A condensed version of this essay was published in September 2022 in The 74.