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Education– to–Workforce

WHITEPAPER SERIES

JULY 2026

Arizona's Education-to-Workforce
Challenge: Moving from Dispersed
Efforts to Shared Direction



Arizona's economy is dynamic,
and the state's ability to
prepare, attract, and retain
skilled talent is increasingly
central to its competitiveness.

Many committed people and organizations across Arizona are undertaking important efforts to ensure that students are well prepared to move from education into the workforce. These efforts are creating new opportunities for students, educational institutions, and employers. Schools, colleges, workforce boards, employers, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and local leaders are all part of this work. Their efforts reflect a broad commitment to students, families, communities, and Arizona's economy.

Education, from prekindergarten to high school and beyond, serves a more fundamental purpose than simply preparing people for work. It helps young people and adults alike build the knowledge, skills, character, and dispositions they need to participate in civic life, strengthen their communities, and lead meaningful lives. This broader purpose is reflected in Arizona's Achieve60AZ attainment goal—that 60 percent of the state's population of working adults (ages 25-64) will have a certificate, license, or degree by 2030—emphasizing how education and training after high school contribute to individual opportunity, workforce readiness, and statewide prosperity. A stronger connection between education and workforce can build on that foundational purpose by helping more Arizonans develop as students, community members, voters, and workers who are prepared for opportunity in a changing society and a changing economy.

Much of the work to strengthen this connection between education and workforce in Arizona still happens without the shared direction and coordination needed to turn local effort into statewide progress. Isolated efforts, even effective ones, do not have the same overall impact as multiple aligned and coordinated efforts. Arizona's economy is dynamic, and the state's ability to prepare, attract, and retain skilled talent is increasingly central to its competitiveness. Employers need reliable talent pipelines. Students and families need clearer pathways from school to further education, credentials, and careers. Communities need more residents who are prepared to take advantage of the opportunities nearby.

Stakeholders throughout this education-to-workforce ecosystem describe it as crowded, decentralized, and difficult to navigate. There is a prevailing sense that many organizations are doing important work. Still, there is a limited shared understanding of who is doing what, for whom, with what resources, and toward which outcomes. That fragmentation slows progress. It can make it harder for students to see the path ahead, for employers to know where to engage, for policymakers to assess what should scale, and for local success stories to become statewide progress. It can also leave Arizona relying too heavily on individual relationships and local initiative rather than a coherent statewide approach.

This paper is the first in a series from Education Forward Arizona examining how the state can better align education, workforce, and opportunity. The series begins with a clear look at the current ecosystem: where Arizona already has strong assets, where coordination is happening, where shared direction remains limited, and what better alignment could make possible. Future papers will examine lessons from other states, governance and coordination options, funding and accountability levers, and practical steps Arizona can take. Together, the series will build toward a clear statewide framework for strengthening education-to-workforce alignment.

What We Mean by “Education-to-Workforce”

Education-to-workforce alignment is not one program or pathway; it is about more systematically connecting education, skills, credentials, supports, and employment opportunities.

Education-to-workforce alignment is broader than job training. It is the work of helping people move through education, develop useful skills and earn credentials, access needed supports, and connect those experiences to real opportunities in Arizona’s economy.

In Arizona, that work spans many parts of the state’s education and workforce landscape. K–12 schools help students build the academic foundations that make future education and career options possible, including the early learning, reading, math, graduation, enrollment, and attainment milestones tracked through the [Arizona Education Progress Meter](#). Career and technical education programs create more direct exposure to fields of work and industry-recognized skills. Community colleges, universities, and adult education providers offer degrees, certificates, training, and pathways for learners at different points in life. Employers signal what kinds of skills and experience they need. Economic development organizations help shape where job growth is happening. Community-based organizations help people overcome barriers that can keep them from completing education or entering the workforce.

This means education-to-workforce alignment is not one program, one agency, or one funding stream. It is a set of connections across systems that were often built for different purposes and exist side-by-side without formal integration.

Intentional education-to-workforce alignment asks several related questions:

- ▶ How do students and learners gain the skills, credentials, and experiences they need?
- ▶ How do employers communicate demand and find prepared talent?
- ▶ How do people facing barriers access education, training, support, and employment?
- ▶ How do state, regional, and local systems coordinate around shared outcomes?

These questions matter because different parts of the ecosystem often define the work differently. Education systems may focus on learning, completion, credentials, and student progress. Employers may focus on jobs, talent pipelines, hiring needs, and economic growth. Community-based organizations may focus on access, support, barriers, and opportunity. Each perspective is important, but each is insufficient on its own.

The system is not fragmented because people are disengaged. It is fragmented because different entities operate from distinct roles, incentives, definitions, and accountability structures. Arizona's challenge is to create enough shared direction that these distinct parts of the ecosystem can work together without asking every organization to become the same kind of organization. Done well, greater education-to-workforce alignment should help:

- 1.** Students and families understand available pathways.
- 2.** Communities ensure that people who have historically faced barriers are not left out of the state's economic future.
- 3.** Employers engage with education and training systems in more useful ways.
- 4.** Policymakers and funders see where public and private investments are producing results.
- 5.** Arizona connect learning to opportunity statewide with more clarity.

The Current Landscape: Many Actors, No Shared Statewide Direction

Arizona has significant civic energy around workforce issues, but that energy is spread across many actors with different roles, audiences, funding sources, and definitions of success.

Arizona's education-to-workforce landscape includes numerous organizations, systems, and initiatives. That is an asset because it shows that leaders across education, business, workforce development, government, philanthropy, and community-based organizations recognize the importance of helping more people move from education into meaningful work. At the same time, the number of actors creates real complexity when shared goals, clear roles, or common measures of progress do not connect their efforts.

Early ecosystem mapping identified more than 100 organizations throughout Arizona that are connected in some way to workforce development, education-to-workforce alignment, career pathways, economic development, or opportunity-focused services. The point is not the exact number. The point is what the number reveals: Arizona has significant civic energy around workforce issues, but that energy is spread across many actors with different roles, audiences, funding sources, and definitions of success.

For policymakers, this can make it difficult to know who is responsible for what. A legislator or public agency leader may see many programs and partnerships, but still lack a clear picture of which efforts are reaching which students, workers, industries, or regions. Without that shared picture, it is harder to identify gaps, reduce duplication, or decide what should grow.

For students and families, the complexity can be daunting. A student may hear about career and technical education, dual enrollment, industry credentials, apprenticeships, community college pathways, university programs, scholarships, or short-term training, but still struggle to understand how these options connect. The availability and clarity of pathways can depend heavily on where a student lives, which school they attend, and which local partnerships have been built around them.

For employers, the education-to-workforce ecosystem can be hard to navigate. Businesses may be asked to participate in advisory boards, provide input on curriculum, support internships, engage with workforce boards, partner with schools, work with colleges, or respond to separate requests from multiple organizations. Many employers want to help build the state's workforce, but engagement can become fragmented when the system lacks clear entry points or coordinated asks.

For funders and public agencies, the crowded landscape raises another challenge: determining what is working and what should scale. Arizona has strong examples of local innovation, but promising models do not automatically become statewide strategies. Without a shared framework, effective efforts can remain isolated, and resources can be spread across disconnected efforts rather than aligned around common outcomes.

Education, economic growth, and opportunity
are increasingly interdependent.

Three Perspectives, Three Sets of Questions

Education institutions and organizations, employers and industries, and workforce development entities are often working toward related goals, but they ask different questions about what alignment should accomplish.

One reason education-to-workforce coordination is difficult is that different parts of the ecosystem are trying to solve related, but not identical, problems. They often share a broad goal of helping people move into meaningful work, but they ask different questions about how that should happen. This ecosystem can be understood through three overlapping perspectives: education-centric, employer-centric, and opportunity-centric. Each brings something essential, and each is limited when it operates too far apart from the others.

Perspective	Core question	Related questions	Risks and Consequences
Education-centric	How do people gain skills and credentials?	Are students completing? Are credentials portable? Do pathways connect across institutions?	Credentials may not consistently connect to labor demand or employment outcomes
Employer-centric	How do employers get the talent they need?	Which jobs are growing? What skills are in demand? Where are hiring gaps most urgent?	Workforce development may focus too narrowly on short-term hiring needs
Opportunity-centric	Who is being excluded, and why?	What barriers keep people from participating? Which supports are needed? Who is not being reached?	Supports may remain disconnected from credential pathways or employer demand

The education-centric perspective focuses on how people move through learning and training. It asks whether students are prepared, whether they complete programs, whether credentials have value, and whether pathways connect from one level of education to the next. This perspective is essential because workforce readiness depends on strong education systems.

The employer-centric perspective focuses on labor-market demand. It asks what employers need, which industries are growing, which skills are in short supply, and whether education and training programs are preparing enough people for available and emerging jobs. This perspective is essential because education-to-workforce alignment cannot be strong without clear signals from employers and industries.

The opportunity-centric perspective focuses on access and barriers to access. It asks who is being left out, what supports people need to persist, and whether pathways are reaching students and workers who have historically faced barriers to education and employment. This perspective is essential because a pathway does not create opportunity if people cannot access it or complete it.

All three perspectives meaningfully inform efforts to ensure more students are on a path to earning a valuable postsecondary credential and a good job. Education-focused entities help people build skills and credentials. Employers help clarify demand and create opportunity. Community-based and public support organizations help ensure that more people can participate and persist. Without a shared framework, these perspectives can shape work that happens beside one another rather than with one another.

The goal is to create enough shared direction that each part of the ecosystem can maintain its distinct mission while contributing to a larger statewide effort. Done well, that kind of coordination can help organizations reinforce one another's work rather than compete for attention, resources, or influence.

Why Better Alignment Matters Now

Arizona's economic future depends on both attracting talent and ensuring more Arizonans can prepare for, access, and compete for the opportunities being created in the state.

Arizona does have formal workforce development structures and important coordination efforts, including workforce governance, labor-market data capacity, and state-led talent initiatives. These assets matter. The challenge is that they do not yet function as a shared statewide framework that connects education systems, workforce programs, employer demand, regional strategies, and opportunity-focused supports around common outcomes.

This challenge is becoming more urgent because education, economic growth, and opportunity are increasingly interdependent. The state is competing for business investment, industry growth, and long-term economic strength. Those opportunities depend in part on whether Arizona can prepare, attract, and retain enough people with the skills and credentials employers need. Talent attraction will remain an important part of Arizona's economic strategy, especially as the state grows and competes for new investment. At the same time, Arizona has to strengthen its local talent pipeline so that more young people and working-age adults who already live here can build the skills, earn the credentials, and access the supports needed to compete for the economic opportunities being created in the state.

Statewide efforts to improve [postsecondary attainment rates](#) have already shown the importance of increasing the number of residents who complete education and training after high school, while ensuring that credentials and skills align with the jobs being created in the state.

Students and families need clearer, earlier information about how courses, programs, credentials, work-based learning, and postsecondary options connect to real opportunities. Employers need more reliable ways to signal demand and engage with education and training providers. Communities need more residents to access career-connected pathways in the places they live. Public and private leaders need a better way to understand what is working, what should scale, and where additional investment would make the greatest difference.

Better alignment does not mean replacing what Arizona already has. It would mean making existing work easier to see, connect with, and strengthen. A clearer statewide framework could help Arizona understand roles and responsibilities, turn data into decisions, reduce duplication, support regional strategies, and make pathways easier for students and families to navigate.

It could also help employers engage more effectively. Instead of responding to many disconnected requests for input or partnership, businesses could connect through clearer channels tied to regional and statewide priorities. That would make it easier for employers to signal demand, support career-connected learning, contribute to program design, and understand how their engagement fits into a larger strategy.

Stronger alignment could also support local innovation while connecting it to statewide goals. Arizona's regions have different economies, industries, population patterns, and institutional assets. A statewide framework should not erase those differences. It should help strong regional models become more visible, better supported, and easier to adapt where they make sense.

If Arizona wants more students to move into meaningful careers and wants employers to find the talent they need, the state needs a more coherent way to connect learning, credentials, skills, supports, and work.

Education-to-workforce alignment is not one program, one agency, or one funding stream. It is a set of connections across systems that were often built for different purposes and exist side-by-side without formal integration.

What Arizona Needs to Do Next

Improving alignment means capitalizing on the existing efforts in Arizona and making them easier to see, connect, strengthen, and scale.

Arizona's education-to-workforce challenge requires more than adding another program to an already crowded landscape. The state already has strong local efforts, committed leaders, useful data assets, and formal workforce structures. The next step is to create more shared direction across those efforts so they can work together more consistently. The following considerations are intended as starting points for that work.

Build a shared map of the ecosystem.

Arizona would benefit from a clearer, public-facing map of the education-to-workforce ecosystem. Such a map should help leaders and the public understand who is doing what, for whom, with what resources, in which regions, and toward which outcomes.

A shared map would not be an academic exercise. It would give policymakers, employers, educators, funders, and community leaders a practical tool for seeing gaps, duplication, bright spots, and opportunities for coordination. It could also help students and families better understand how programs, pathways, supports, and institutions connect.

This kind of mapping should recognize that organizations play different roles. Some focus on education and credentials. Some focus on employer demand and economic growth. Some focus on access, supports, and barriers. Others help integrate across systems. Making those roles more visible would help Arizona move from a crowded landscape to a more understandable and navigable one.

Establish a common framework for goals and outcomes.

Arizona's education and workforce actors do not need to use identical measures for every purpose, and they should not have to abandon their distinct missions. K–12 schools, CTE programs, community colleges, universities, workforce boards, employers, and community-based organizations each serve different roles.

Still, the state needs a shared vocabulary for the outcomes that matter most. That includes defining what it means to say things like student success, credential value, workforce readiness, employer demand, economic mobility, and access to opportunity. Without a common language, different systems can appear aligned while pursuing different definitions of success.

A common framework would make it easier to connect existing work. It could help leaders see how attainment goals relate to workforce readiness, how credentials relate to employment outcomes, how employer demand relates to program design, and how support services relate to persistence and completion. The purpose would not be to flatten the work into a single set of measures, but rather to enable improved coordination.

Use coordination to strengthen, not replace, local and regional work.

Arizona should build on what is already working. Many of the state's strongest education-to-workforce efforts have grown from local leadership, regional partnerships, and relationships among schools, colleges, employers, public agencies, and community organizations.

Statewide alignment should not mean centralizing every decision. Arizona's regions have different economies, industries, populations, and institutional assets. A stronger statewide framework should provide sufficient shared direction so that effective local models can be identified, supported, adapted, and scaled where appropriate. This distinction matters; local initiative is one of Arizona's strengths, but it should not be relied on to create statewide alignment instead of more intentional alignment. Better coordination can help ensure that promising work does not remain isolated, that regions are not left to solve statewide challenges on their own, and that students' access to opportunity does not depend too heavily on where they happen to live.

Arizona has the pieces to build a more coherent education-to-workforce approach. The work ahead is to connect those pieces in ways that clarify roles, strengthen pathways, support regional innovation, and expand opportunity for more Arizonans.



About the Education-to-Workforce Whitepaper Series

Education Forward Arizona advocates for high-quality education and training that aligns with career and workforce opportunities to advance the quality of life for all Arizonans. This series examines Arizona's education-to-workforce landscape and identifies practical ways to strengthen alignment, clarify roles, support regional innovation, and expand opportunity across the state.

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This whitepaper was developed in partnership with
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