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Education- to-Workforce

WHITEPAPER SERIES

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From Coordination by Relationship
to Coordination by Design



Education prepares
people for work,
but it also develops
knowledge, judgment,
civic capacity, and the
ability to participate
fully in communities.

The first two papers in Education Forward Arizona’s whitepaper series focus on the opportunities Arizona has to strengthen its education-to-workforce efforts and how other states have sought to address challenges similar to those we are facing in Arizona. The premise that undergirds both papers is that Arizona’s education-to-workforce ecosystem has substantial strengths, thanks to important work and vital efforts across the state. Still, fragmentation and limited shared direction constrain the efficacy and impact of that work.

Clearer pathways for students and families, more reliable talent planning for employers, and stronger connections between regional effort and statewide priorities will require more than relationships, local initiative, or short-term leadership attention. Those forms of coordination matter, but they are difficult to sustain consistently across a system as varied as Arizona’s.

Important pieces are already in place. The Workforce Arizona Council and ARIZONA@WORK provide structure within the formal workforce system. Talent Ready AZ and the Governor’s Workforce Cabinet bring executive-level attention to education, training, and workforce needs. The Office of Economic Opportunity provides labor-market analysis and workforce data capacity. Across the state, schools, career and technical education programs, community colleges, universities, workforce boards, employers, nonprofits, economic development organizations, and community-based partners contribute to student opportunity and workforce readiness.

Collectively, however, they do not yet constitute an intentionally designed statewide system for education-to-workforce coordination.

A more deliberate approach would connect this work across systems, regions, and institutions without controlling every decision or replacing existing organizations. Its value would come from clearer communication, greater visibility into regional and local efforts, stronger use of shared data, regular collaboration, and sustained attention to the needs of students and families. How Arizona deliberately structures coordination and alignment could take several forms, including a compact, a commission, a public-private framework, a strengthened existing structure, or another statewide approach.

This paper does not recommend one model or another. It makes a simpler case: Arizona needs a clearer, sustainable way to connect and coordinate the many systems and entities that shape student opportunity, talent development, and economic growth. Greater coordination and alignment will be vital to improving student outcomes and for enhancing Arizona’s competitiveness.

What Arizona Has Developed Already

Arizona's education-to-workforce landscape includes substantial assets, such as formal workforce development infrastructure; educational goals, including a statewide postsecondary attainment goal; executive attention to talent development; reliable public-facing data; and regional partnerships that connect education, training, employers, and community supports.

The most formal part of this landscape is the workforce system created under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. The Workforce Arizona Council and ARIZONA@WORK operate within a defined structure that includes a state plan, performance reporting, and required measures. For programs and services governed by federal workforce law, Arizona has an established framework for strategy, service delivery, and accountability.

Executive-level efforts add another layer of coordination. Talent Ready AZ and the Governor's Workforce Cabinet reflect a statewide focus on connecting education and training to Arizona's talent needs and economic priorities. The Office of Economic Opportunity contributes through labor-market analysis, workforce planning support, data sharing, and apprenticeship-related work. Together, these efforts provide state and regional leaders with useful information on workforce trends, changing employer demand, and emerging needs.

Educational institutions carry much of the work that makes student progress possible. K-12 schools, career and technical education programs, JTEDs, adult education providers, community colleges, and universities help learners build knowledge, skills, credentials, and experience. Community colleges play an especially important role in regional workforce development because they serve people at different stages of life and offer programs connected to local economies. Universities contribute through degree programs, research, innovation, and partnerships that support Arizona's long-term talent pipeline.

Employers, industry associations, chambers of commerce, and economic development organizations provide another essential perspective by signaling where jobs are growing and which skills are becoming more important. Community-based organizations and nonprofits help people navigate systems, access support, and address barriers that can make it harder to complete education or enter the workforce.

These organizations and systems do not serve the same purpose, nor should they. Their value comes partly from the different roles they play. Better statewide coordination should build from those strengths rather than duplicate the formal workforce system, replace education governance, or override regional partnerships.

The System Coordination Gap

Arizona's existing systems and assets do not yet add up to an intentionally designed statewide system for education-to-workforce coordination. Each part of the landscape has its own purpose, authority, measures, and relationships. While they often function in juxtaposition, less clear is how those parts actually work together to advance shared goals, meet student needs, support workforce priorities, leverage regional strengths, and uphold public accountability.

The state's most formal structure sits within the workforce development system. The Workforce Arizona Council and ARIZONA@WORK provide planning, performance reporting, and accountability for programs governed by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. That structure creates clear expectations for an important part of the workforce system.

Within that defined scope, Arizona's public workforce system already demonstrates what intentional coordination can look like. ARIZONA@WORK operates through a common statewide framework while allowing its 12 local workforce areas to adapt services and partnerships to local conditions. State and local plans, workforce boards, one-stop operators, formal partner agreements, service expectations, and accountability requirements help connect programs that would otherwise operate separately.

That makes the distinction important. Arizona does have designed coordination within the public workforce system, but it does not have an equivalent way to connect that work across the broader education-to-workforce continuum. WIOA does not govern the full education-to-workforce landscape. It does not set a strategy for K-12 education, community colleges, universities, career advising, credential pathways, employer engagement, or the community-based supports that help students and learners navigate education and transition into work.

Other statewide efforts contribute to alignment, yet responsibility remains distributed across systems. Talent Ready AZ and the Governor's Workforce Cabinet support executive-level coordination. The Office of Economic Opportunity provides labor-market analysis and data capacity. The Arizona Department of Education, community colleges, universities, workforce boards, employers, nonprofits, and regional partners each shape different parts of the pipeline.

The missing piece is a deliberately designed way to connect those contributions across the full education-to-workforce continuum. The gap becomes easier to see through practical questions:

- ▶ Who is responsible for which parts of the education-to-workforce pathway?
- ▶ How do students and families understand available options?
- ▶ Where are regional models working well, and how can the state learn from them?
- ▶ How should employers' needs inform education and training decisions?
- ▶ Which data should be reviewed publicly and regularly?
- ▶ When that data reveals gaps or uneven outcomes, how do partners decide who should respond?
- ▶ How should statewide priorities support regional action while regional realities shape statewide strategy?

Answering these questions more consistently would help ensure that students and families are not left to navigate disconnected systems on their own.

Today, those questions, when considered by different entities, are likely to be answered in different ways. A policymaker may see multiple workforce initiatives without a clear picture of how they relate to student pathways. An employer may want to support talent development but be unsure where to engage. A student may encounter promising options without understanding how they connect to further education, credentials, transfer, financial aid, or work. A regional partnership may have a strong model without a clear way to inform statewide strategy.

The result can be missed opportunities and duplicated efforts. Students and families with greater access to advising, transportation, local programs, and support networks are often better positioned to navigate complexity. Employers may plan around incomplete information. Public and private investments may support worthwhile programs without contributing to broader alignment.

Arizona's challenge, then, is about more than simply recognizing that education and workforce development are connected. It is to create a more intentional way to organize the communication, data use, convening, and shared follow-through that make those connections useful.

Why This Matters for Students and Families

Students and families must remain at the center of a more intentional approach to education-to-workforce coordination. Workforce conversations naturally include employer demand, agency responsibilities, funding rules, and program administration. Those considerations are necessary, but the broader purpose is to help more Arizonans move through education, build skills, earn meaningful credentials, access needed supports, and connect those experiences to opportunity.

For many students and families, the current landscape can be difficult to understand. A student may struggle to make sense of career and technical education, dual enrollment, industry credentials, apprenticeships, community college programs, university pathways, adult education, scholarships, short-term training, and employer-connected learning. The challenge is both a function of the number of options and the inherent complexity of understanding how those options fit together, which ones lead to further education or employment, what they cost, whether credits transfer, which credentials have value, and where support is available.

When those connections are unclear, students and families have to do more of the navigation themselves. Some students have stronger advising, more accessible local programs, reliable transportation, and support networks that can help them compare options. Others have less access to those resources. In a fragmented system, that difference can shape which opportunities students see and which ones they can pursue. A well-coordinated system should absorb more of that complexity rather than expecting students and families to understand which institution, program, funding stream, or agency is responsible for each step.

These choices begin earlier than many workforce conversations suggest. Decisions made in middle school and high school can shape later options. Course-taking, career exploration, dual enrollment, CTE participation, financial aid awareness, and exposure to fields of work all influence what comes next.

Better statewide coordination could make those pathways easier to understand and help identify where advising, transfer, program availability, or student supports are uneven. Public information could show more clearly how education and training options connect across high school, postsecondary education, credentials, work-based learning, and careers. Regular collaboration among institutions, agencies, employers, and regional partners could also help keep student and family needs visible when priorities are set.

Clarity should not come at the expense of choice. Arizona students have different goals, responsibilities, talents, and circumstances. Some will move directly into a university, while others will begin at a community college, pursue an industry credential or apprenticeship, enter the military, or combine education and work. Many adults will return to education or training later in life. A more coherent system should help people understand those choices earlier and navigate them with greater confidence.

Education prepares people for work, but it also develops knowledge, judgment, civic capacity, and the ability to participate fully in their communities and society more broadly. Stronger education-to-workforce alignment should build on that broader purpose. Better coordination will not remove every barrier, but it can make the landscape easier to see, explain, and navigate, especially for students and families with fewer resources to make sense of fragmented systems.

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Why This Matters for Employers and Statewide Talent Development Planning

Employers also need a clearer and more reliable way to understand how education, training, talent development, and economic opportunity intersect. Businesses may be asked to participate in advisory groups, support work-based learning, provide input on curriculum and training, and partner separately with schools, colleges, workforce boards, and other organizations. These forms of participation can strengthen pathways and give students direct exposure to careers. When the requests come from multiple systems separately, however, engagement can become fragmented and difficult to sustain.

More deliberate statewide coordination could create clearer channels for employers to communicate demand, support work-based learning, and help education and training partners understand where skills, credentials, and experience are most needed. Employer demand should help inform education and training pathways without making immediate hiring needs the organizing principle for a student's education. Clearer channels for employer participation could make that engagement easier to organize and more useful to students, educators, and workforce partners.

Arizona also has a broader interest in making talent planning more visible and reliable. The state continues to pursue economic growth in industries that depend on skilled workers, and leaders across economic development, education, workforce, and business need a clearer picture of how the education and training ecosystem is responding. That picture should include where talent pipelines are strong, where gaps remain, and where additional coordination may be needed.

A useful view of talent development must extend beyond immediate hiring needs. Students need strong academic foundations, durable skills, opportunities for further education, and pathways that remain valuable as industries and occupations change. Employers need talent pipelines capable of supporting current operations and future growth.

Shared data, clearer roles, and more organized employer engagement could give public and private leaders a stronger basis for deciding where investment or additional attention may be warranted. The result would be better visibility into how Arizona is preparing residents for opportunity and how employer demand is changing over time.

Statewide and Regional Work Should Strengthen One Another

Statewide coordination should not pull decision-making away from regions or replace the local relationships that already help students, employers, and communities. Arizona is too varied for one approach to work the same way everywhere. The stronger model is one in which statewide direction and regional action inform one another.

Regional and local partnerships are often where education-to-workforce alignment becomes tangible. Schools, community colleges, workforce boards, employers, chambers, nonprofits, city and county leaders, and community organizations respond to needs they can see directly. They understand which industries are growing nearby, which programs students can access, where employers are ready to partner, and which barriers make participation difficult.

Arizona's public workforce system already reflects this principle within its own defined responsibilities. ARIZONA@WORK provides common statewide expectations and a shared identity, while local workforce areas adapt delivery, partnerships, and priorities to the communities and labor markets they serve. The broader education-to-workforce landscape involves a range of institutions and authorities; statewide consistency does not require every region to operate in the same way.

Those relationships are grounded in place. Rural, tribal, border, northern, and metropolitan communities will not all apply statewide priorities in the same way. Regional economies differ, as do student populations, employer needs, institutional capacity, transportation, access to postsecondary options, and community supports. Statewide coordination can help make those differences more visible and support regions in responding to them. Local work should also have a clearer route into statewide strategy. A successful regional model may offer lessons that are relevant elsewhere. A persistent local barrier may reveal a broader system problem. Without a reliable way to connect regional experience to statewide planning, those can remain obscured or underutilized.

A more deliberate statewide approach could provide shared goals, common questions, useful data, and clearer information about regional activity. Statewide coordination can help regions understand broader goals, labor-market trends, funding opportunities, and measures of progress. Regional partners can show what those goals mean in practice and which barriers matter most locally.

For students and families, this matters because opportunity is experienced locally. Pathways, which are predicated on academic preparation, are only valuable to students when they can find them, understand them, access and afford them, and complete them. Employers likewise experience talent needs through specific regional labor markets, even when their industries are part of broader statewide priorities.

The aim should be mutual reinforcement. Regional and local efforts should become more visible and better connected to statewide decisions, while statewide priorities should be more useful to the institutions and organizations responsible for implementing them. Arizona does not need every region to look the same. It needs a system that helps different regions contribute to shared goals in ways that fit their communities.

The broader education-to-workforce landscape involves a range of institutions and authorities; statewide consistency does not require every region to operate in the same way.

What Statewide Coordination Would Need to Do

Statewide coordination will only be useful if it sustains work that the current ecosystem cannot reliably perform on its own. Its purpose is practical: help Arizona communicate more clearly, use information more consistently, and bring the right partners together often enough to support shared action.

Whatever coordinating mechanism Arizona ultimately chooses, three responsibilities should be central: communication, data analysis and publication, and convening.

Clear Communication

Arizona needs a clearer way to explain how the education-to-workforce ecosystem functions, both to those inside the system and to the public. For system partners, communication should create a stronger understanding of roles, goals, constraints, and contributions. K-12 schools, CTE programs, community colleges, universities, workforce boards, state agencies, employers, nonprofits, and economic development organizations do not have the same mission. They do need enough shared understanding to know where their work connects, where gaps exist, and when coordination is needed.

Students and families need clearer information about how courses, credentials, programs, financial aid, transfer, work-based learning, and careers connect. Employers need understandable and coordinated entry points for engagement. Policymakers and funders need to see how programs and initiatives relate to broader goals. The public should not need to understand the organizational structure behind a pathway to use it.

A statewide coordinating mechanism could help maintain that shared picture through clearer descriptions of roles and responsibilities, public-facing pathway information, regional activity maps, and regular progress updates. The aim is not to make a complex ecosystem appear simple. It is to make the complexity easier to understand and navigate.

Data Analysis and Publication

Arizona also needs stronger routines for using data to support public understanding and better decisions.

The state already has meaningful capacity for workforce and labor-market data. The next step is to make information more consistently available for analysis, review, and use across systems, with particular attention to whether students can find, access, complete, and benefit from available pathways.

That means asking practical questions, like:

- ▶ Are students accessing clear pathways?
- ▶ Are they completing credentials that connect to further education, employment, or advancement?
- ▶ Are some students or communities encountering barriers at important transition points?
- ▶ Do outcomes vary across regions or student groups?
- ▶ Are employers seeing the talent pipelines they need?

Public-facing information can help students and families understand available pathways and outcomes while giving employers, policymakers, and communities a clearer view of progress and gaps. Internal analysis can support decisions about advising, program design, credential pathways, transfer, student supports, work-based learning, and investment.

No single measure can determine whether a pathway is successful. Access, completion, transfer, employment, earnings, advancement, regional need, credential value, and student support all provide useful information. A coordinating mechanism could establish a regular process for reviewing those questions together.

Regular Convening and Collaboration

Arizona also needs a reliable place for cross-sector collaboration. Many education-to-workforce conversations already take place across the state. What is less consistent is a sustained way to connect those conversations to shared information, clearer roles, and follow-through.

Regular convening and opportunities for meaningful collaboration should involve the institutions and organizations that shape student opportunity and workforce readiness, including K-12 education, CTE, community colleges, universities, workforce development entities, employers, industry groups, economic development organizations, public agencies, nonprofits, philanthropy, community-based organizations, and regional partners.

The value comes from what happens through that collaboration. Partners can review data, identify gaps, elevate regional models, clarify responsibilities, surface implementation barriers, and determine where coordination needs to improve. A regular forum also creates a way to keep students and families visible when systems with different missions and incentives come together.

Communication, data, and convening reinforce one another. Communication creates shared understanding. Data identifies questions that need attention. Convening gives partners a place to respond. As such, together they represent the core capabilities any statewide coordinating mechanism should be expected to sustain.

Design Choices Arizona Will Need To Make

Once Arizona decides how to formalize this work, the arrangement it chooses will need enough authority, trust, and capacity to be useful. The state does not need to select a single model immediately, but endowing a particular entity with authority, formal or otherwise, should be treated as a strategic design decision.

The point of assigning authority is not to centralize decision-making. It is to ensure that someone, or some clearly defined structure, is responsible for sustaining the coordination that students, families, employers, regions, and institutions depend on.

Arizona's workforce system also illustrates that clearer coordination does not require placing all responsibility in a single organization. State and local plans, defined boards, partner agreements, shared expectations, and accountability requirements create structure even though responsibility remains distributed among multiple entities. Some structures draw strength from the Governor's Office, where visibility and executive leadership can help agencies and partners focus on shared priorities. Others draw strength from statute, which can provide durability and more clearly define responsibilities. Public-private arrangements can build commitment across education, business, workforce, nonprofit, philanthropic, and community leadership. Interagency agreements, compacts, or expanded responsibilities for existing entities offer other possibilities.

Different approaches offer different advantages and tradeoffs. A Governor-led structure could bring visibility and executive attention, while also being more closely connected to changes in administration. A statutory structure could provide greater durability and clearer responsibilities, though establishing it may require more time and careful design. A public-private compact could encourage broad ownership, while still requiring clear expectations for follow-through. A shared responsibilities agreement could preserve existing authority while requiring precision about who maintains communication, data routines, convening, and public reporting.

These considerations do not point to a single preferred model. They illustrate the choices Arizona will need to weigh as it determines how coordination should be organized and sustained. The relevant question is whether the chosen arrangement can perform the work Arizona needs. It should be visible enough for system partners to understand its role, sustainable enough to last beyond a single initiative or grant cycle, and trusted enough that education, workforce, business, nonprofit, and regional partners see value in participating.

Coordination should also remain distinct from control. K-12 schools, community colleges, universities, workforce boards, employers, and community organizations each have their own missions and legal responsibilities. Those roles should remain clear. This balance is particularly important for education, where workforce needs should inform decisions without narrowing students' access to broad academic preparation and opportunities that remain valuable as industries and occupations change. The following questions should guide how we think about establishing and designing a more intentional structure for coordinating education-to-workforce systems and efforts:

What should be consistent statewide, and what should remain flexible regionally?

Arizona will need enough common direction to make goals, information, and responsibilities understandable while allowing regions to respond to different communities, institutions, and labor markets.

How will responsibility remain clear when authority is distributed? Whatever form Arizona chooses should identify who is responsible for maintaining coordination, carrying work forward, and ensuring that agreed-upon responsibilities do not depend primarily on personal relationships.

How will Arizona know the approach is adding value? The test should not simply be whether a new structure exists. Students and families should encounter clearer pathways; employers and regional partners should have clearer ways to engage; and state leaders should have better visibility into whether the pieces of the system are working together.

Moving from coordination by relationship to coordination by design does not require Arizona to replace the work already underway. It requires a more intentional approach to connecting that work, clarifying responsibilities, and making the system easier for people to navigate. The form of that coordination should be determined carefully. Its value will ultimately depend on whether it helps Arizona turn strong individual efforts into a more coherent experience for students, families, employers, and communities.



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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