

2

# Education- to-Workforce

WHITEPAPER SERIES

AUGUST 2026

Developing Arizona-Specific Solutions  
to Common Challenges



---

Efforts such as the Achieve60AZ attainment goal and the Arizona Education Progress Meter have helped focus statewide attention on preparation, enrollment, persistence, completion, and credential attainment. Education-to-workforce alignment adds another important dimension: whether students can connect what they learn and achieve in education to opportunity in Arizona's changing economy.

---

# What We Can Learn from How Other States Approach Education-to-Workforce Coordination and Alignment

Arizona is working to strengthen the connections among education, workforce development, employer needs, and economic opportunity. Committed leaders, established institutions, useful data, and strong local and regional partnerships already support students and employers within the education-to-workforce ecosystem.

Distributed across K–12 schools, colleges, workforce agencies, economic development organizations, employers, and community partners, this ecosystem has the potential to create greater opportunities for students, more easily navigable pathways from school into a career, and talent pipelines that employers and industries can depend on year after year. The challenge we face as a state is that each of these systems, and the entities that define them, operates more or less independently, with minimal formal coordination and alignment, and different measures of success.

Education Forward Arizona's interest in education-to-workforce alignment begins with students and the education systems that support them. The organization remains focused on whether young people and adults have access to strong learning, clear pathways, meaningful credentials, and opportunities to build stable and fulfilling lives. Better connections among education, workforce development, and employers can help students understand their options and make informed choices as they move through school, further education, training, and work.

This attention to workforce considerations extends Education Forward Arizona's longstanding commitment to educational attainment and student outcomes. Efforts such as Achieve60AZ and the Arizona Education Progress Meter have helped focus statewide attention on preparation, enrollment, persistence, completion, and credential attainment. Education-to-workforce alignment adds another important dimension: whether students can connect what they learn and achieve in education to opportunity in Arizona's changing economy. The aim is to strengthen the value of education for students and communities while preserving its broader role in civic life, personal development, and community well-being.

When the systems and entities that support students do not coordinate and align, the fragmentation discussed in the first paper in this series can blunt the efficacy of otherwise promising efforts and initiatives. As a result, students and families face more difficult choices, employers encounter less reliable talent pipelines, and strong regional programs are less likely to produce consistent statewide progress.

## Statewide Coordination and Alignment Require Intentional Design

Achieving greater alignment will require clearer ownership of the cross-system functions that no single organization currently demonstrates, along with stronger connections among the institutions responsible for education, workforce development, and economic opportunity. Over time, those functions could form the basis of a shared statewide framework that clarifies roles, connects goals and measures, supports regional implementation, and creates a more consistent process for reviewing progress. Developing that framework will require Arizona to determine which responsibilities should be carried out statewide, how participating institutions can retain their distinct missions, and where coordination can add the greatest value for students, communities, and employers.

The challenges Arizona faces are not unique; other states face many of the same coordination and alignment challenges. To address them, states have adopted a variety of approaches. Several have designated a statewide organization responsible for planning, evaluation, or public reporting. Others have developed stronger links between state priorities and regional implementation. Some use education and workforce data to guide decisions about credentials, programs, or public investment. Public-private collaborations also help sustain shared goals and support regional action.

Statewide education and talent planning is increasingly common, although states define and organize it differently. All states maintain federally required workforce plans, and approximately 40 have adopted broader statewide attainment or talent-development goals. As of May 2026, 21 states had taken the additional step of submitting combined federal plans that formally integrate career and technical education with workforce planning. Only a handful of states have developed frameworks that connect most of these elements across education, workforce development, economic development, and regional implementation. Even in these states, authority generally remains distributed across multiple agencies, plans, and funding streams.

This second paper in our education-to-workforce whitepaper series highlights a selected group of states and the approaches they've taken to improve coordination and alignment among their education and workforce systems. The purpose is to show what Arizona can learn from how these states have tackled challenges similar to those we face and to consider which approaches might work for our particular context and goals as a state. Accordingly, the profiles included in this paper are not intended to rank states and their approaches, benchmark Arizona's performance, or provide a comprehensive review of education-to-workforce coordination across the country.

# Essential Coordination and Alignment Functions

State approaches to coordination and alignment vary widely in both structure and the authority assigned to participating entities. Some have been established through state statute, while others rely on executive action, interagency agreements, or voluntary partnerships. Examining these approaches and their component parts can help Arizona understand the range of available choices, including how states assign responsibility, support regional implementation, use data, and connect coordination to decisions and outcomes. The value lies in identifying which functions appear most relevant to Arizona's challenges, what conditions help them work, and which limitations or tradeoffs should inform the design of a framework suited to Arizona's institutions, regions, and goals.

## Designated Responsibility for Stewardship and Coordination

Statewide stewardship can include maintaining a common plan, tracking progress, organizing information, identifying gaps, and convening leaders when improvement is needed. These duties may reside in a public agency, a coordinating body, a partnership, or a combination of organizations.

Whatever form Arizona considers, planning, analysis, public reporting, and follow-through need an identifiable home. Clear responsibility helps sustain attention when participating institutions retain separate authority.

## A Connection Between Statewide Direction and Regional Action

A statewide framework can provide common goals, definitions, information, and expectations for quality. Regional partners need the capacity to interpret and apply that direction within their communities.

Designated conveners, dedicated staff, technical assistance, and access to resources can support implementation. Strong relationships remain essential. Sustained collaboration also depends on clearly assigned responsibilities and sufficient capacity.

## **Evidence That Informs Decisions**

Data can inform credential reviews, program assessments, public investments, and the identification of pathways that need improvement. Its value increases when leaders establish a regular process for reviewing findings, assigning responsibility, and determining what should change.

Measures of value require judgment. Employment demand and wages offer important information. Completion, advancement, transfer, regional need, access, and long-term educational opportunity also matter. A credible process makes the criteria visible and applies them consistently.

## **Results People Can See and Use**

Coordination gains meaning through the experiences it creates and the potential it unlocks. Students and families may benefit from clearer pathways, stronger advising, easier transfer, or better information about education and careers. Employers may gain more consistent ways to communicate demand, participate in work-based learning, and engage with education partners. Communities may become better equipped to connect residents with training and opportunity.

Plans, meetings, and dashboards support this work. The clearest measure of progress is whether they lead to better pathways, services, decisions, and opportunities.

---

A stronger statewide approach should produce improvements that students, families, employers, and communities can recognize.

---

# State Profiles in Education-to-Workforce Coordination and Alignment

The following state examples in this section were chosen because they address questions that are especially relevant to Arizona. Selection reflects the usefulness of each approach, the availability of evidence, and the policy or implementation tradeoffs it reveals. Each state operates within a distinct legal, political, economic, and institutional setting. Those conditions affect how responsibilities are assigned, who participates, how decisions are made, and whether an approach is likely to last.

Some states have mature structures with years of experience. Others are implementing recent changes. In several cases, the strongest findings relate to individual programs rather than an entire statewide coordination model. Importantly, the available research does not establish that any one governance structure caused statewide gains in attainment, employment, earnings, or economic growth.

The examples highlight several distinct functions. Washington illustrates statewide stewardship, evaluation, and transparency. Texas shows how statewide priorities can be supported through regional conveners. North Carolina demonstrates how a shared attainment goal and a public-private backbone can sustain collective work. Florida connects credential information to decisions about public support.

Together, these experiences broaden Arizona's view of the choices available. They also surface practical questions about responsibility, regional capacity, data use, funding, and results. The central task is to determine which functions fit Arizona's needs and how they can strengthen the work already underway.



## Washington: Establishing a Steward for the System

Washington assigns statewide planning, evaluation, and public reporting to the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board. State law establishes the board as a public agency and includes leaders representing business, labor, K-12 education, community and technical colleges, and the employment system. Its responsibilities include developing the state workforce plan, evaluating programs, studying employer needs, and reporting on system performance.

The board serves as a steward for the broader system. Agencies, institutions, and regional partners continue to operate their own programs. Statewide planning and analysis have a visible home.

Serving as a hub for public information is a central function of the Board. Its Career Bridge website provides information on thousands of education and training programs. For many of them, it also reports completion, employment, earnings, and industry outcomes. Employer surveys, performance studies, and evaluations add further context. Regional workforce councils and local partners retain responsibility for implementation. The statewide structure supplies common analysis and expectations while allowing regional plans to reflect local labor markets.

The model's authority is strongest in planning, evaluation, transparency, and system learning. The board can identify weak performance and recommend action. It generally cannot direct independent education systems to change their programs or budgets.

**Key Takeaway:** For Arizona, Washington illustrates the value of assigning responsibility for maintaining a shared plan, organizing information, reporting results, and convening cross-system reviews. The precise organizational form could differ. The underlying stewardship function remains relevant.

### Sources and Where to Learn More

**Washington State Legislature.** [RCW 28C.18.020](#), establishing the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board.

**Washington Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board.** [Talent and Prosperity for All: Washington State Workforce Plan, 2024–2028](#) and [Career Bridge](#).

**Results for America.** Workforce Policy Roadmap and the 2025 State Standard of Excellence



## Texas: Linking Statewide Direction to Regional Action

Texas coordinates K–12 education, higher education, and workforce agencies through the Governor's Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative. The Texas Education Agency, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and Texas Workforce Commission retain their own authority while working from shared priorities, funding strategies, and data tools.

Building a Talent Strong Texas establishes statewide goals for attainment and credentials of value. The plan considers earnings, debt, and career mobility as part of the state's effort to define progress. Regional intermediaries carry much of the implementation work. Through the Texas Regional Pathways Network, local conveners bring together school systems, colleges, workforce boards, employers, nonprofit organizations, and local government, and each region can focus on pathways connected to its industries and labor market.



Common quality indicators, labor-market information, technical assistance, and grant support provide a shared foundation for regional work. According to Jobs for the Future, the network reached 33 regional partnerships covering 24 of the state's 28 workforce areas. Participating regions reported gains in career exploration, work-based learning, industry certifications, dual enrollment, program progression, and completion.

**Key Takeaway:** Texas is especially relevant to Arizona because regional variation is substantial in both states. The example shows that designated conveners, common expectations, useful data, staff capacity, and sustained support strengthen local flexibility.

### Sources and Where to Learn More

**Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.** [Building a Talent Strong Texas.](#)

**Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.** [DataBridge.](#)

**Jobs for the Future.** [Texas Regional Pathways Network: Education to Career Model, 2025–2026.](#)



## North Carolina: Sustaining a Shared Goal Through a Public–Private Backbone

North Carolina shows how a backbone organization can maintain attention, translate data, and support regional implementation. Its influence rests largely on trust, credibility, and voluntary participation. The model offers evidence of stronger collaboration and capacity, though it does not establish that the backbone caused statewide attainment gains.

This is enabled by combining a statutory attainment goal with a statewide nonprofit backbone and regional collaboratives. State law establishes a goal of two million residents ages 25 to 44 holding a high-quality credential or degree by 2030, while myFutureNC supports the effort through convening, communications, data use, and technical assistance.

The organization's public dashboard tracks statewide progress across 18 indicators and provides county and regional profiles. These tools help local leaders see differences in readiness, access, completion, and attainment.

Regional collaboratives bring together schools, colleges, workforce boards, employers, nonprofit organizations, and government partners. A third-party evaluation found that collaboratives made stronger progress when they had trusted relationships, dedicated project management, useful data, coaching, and opportunities to learn from peers. Uneven staffing and limited shared measurement remained challenges.

Arizona already has the Achieve60AZ attainment goal. Launched in 2016, the effort brought together 150 community, business, philanthropic, and educational organizations and 47 local governments around the goal of having 60 percent of Arizona adults ages 25 to 64 hold a certificate, license, or degree by 2030. Whereas North Carolina's goal has formal standing in law, the Achieve60AZ attainment goal grew from voluntary support and has not been codified in state statute. As such, it draws its standing from broad participation, public visibility, and continued commitment, but lacks the accountability and coordination mechanisms that statutory requirements or state funding can provide.

**Key Takeaway:** For Arizona, the North Carolina example raises questions about how the Achieve60AZ attainment goal could be strengthened and connect more directly to regional goals, public information, implementation support, and formal participation by state systems.

### Sources and Where to Learn More

**North Carolina General Statutes.** [Section 116C-10](#), which established the state's postsecondary attainment goal.

**myFutureNC.** [North Carolina Educational Attainment Dashboard](#) and [county and regional profiles](#).

**UNC School of Government, ncIMPACT Initiative.** [2023 Local Educational Attainment Collaborative Final Report](#).



## Florida: Connecting Credential Information to Public Decisions

Florida has developed a formal process for determining which credentials qualify for inclusion on its Master Credentials List, which is designed to ensure “alignment between the state’s education system and industry needs, directing federal and state funds to workforce education and training programs.” The state’s Reimagining Education and Career Help framework places a Credentials Review Committee within CareerSource Florida. Education, workforce, economic development, institutional, and industry representatives participate in the process.

Credentials are reviewed against statewide standards related to labor-market demand, wages, and opportunities for advancement. Inclusion on the list can affect eligibility for certain state and federal education and workforce investments. Credentials may also be reviewed again or removed. The process endows information with practical consequences; institutions and regional entities submit credentials for consideration, while the state applies common standards and publishes the results.

**Key Takeaway:** For Arizona, Florida illustrates how shared information can enable cross-system processes for program review, equipment investments, grant eligibility, pathway design, and the recognition of valuable credentials earned before age 25 that align with workforce needs and provide clear opportunities for students.

### Sources and Where to Learn More

**Florida Statutes.** [Section 14.36 and related provisions](#) establishing the Reimagining Education and Career Help framework.

**CareerSource Florida.** [Master Credentials List](#) and [Credentials Review Committee](#) materials.

**National Skills Coalition and Credential Engine.** Research on credential transparency, quality assurance, portability, stackability, and labor-market value.

*A further lesson from Tennessee: Tennessee has paired statewide priorities with programs that students can use directly. Evaluations of Tennessee Promise and Advise TN found improvements in college enrollment, associate degree attainment, financial aid completion, and college-going. Those findings apply to the individual programs rather than the state's full coordination structure. They still illustrate an important principle: statewide alignment and supporting initiatives gain credibility when it produces clearer pathways and stronger support for learners.*

The state examples use different structures, but several common features emerge. Each creates clearer responsibility for a function that spans established systems. Regional implementation is supported through information, staff capacity, standards, or technical assistance. Data becomes more useful when they enter a recurring review or decision process. The strongest approaches also connect coordination to changes that learners, employers, and communities can experience.

These functions do not need to reside in the same organization. They do need to reinforce one another. Stewardship without implementation capacity may produce plans with limited effect. Regional flexibility without statewide direction can leave progress uneven. Data without a decision process may improve understanding without changing action. Arizona's task is to determine how these functions should be organized within its own legal, institutional, and regional context.

---

Achieving greater alignment will require clearer ownership of the cross-system functions that no single organization currently demonstrates, along with stronger connections among the institutions responsible for education, workforce development, and economic opportunity.

---

# Planning Considerations for Arizona

The state examples point toward several practical considerations that help clarify the work ahead of us while leaving decisions about governance and formal authority for a more detailed discussion.

## Define the Essential Coordination and Alignment Functions Arizona Needs

Arizona can consider implementing a statewide process for identifying and documenting the responsibilities that require clear statewide ownership. Those functions may reside within a single organization, be distributed through formal agreements, or be shared among public and private partners, provided that roles and accountability are explicit. Those responsibilities may include maintaining a shared education-to-workforce plan, defining and monitoring common measures of system health and success, organizing information about programs and investments, supporting regional implementation, reviewing results, and reporting progress to the public. Employer engagement and pathway quality may also require greater coordination.

Identifying essential functions like these can help leaders agree on what Arizona needs before selecting and reinforcing a structure that meets those needs. Washington's system-steward role, North Carolina's backbone capacity, and Florida's credential-review process illustrate distinct responsibilities that can be organized in different ways.

The next phase should clarify which responsibilities must be carried out statewide, which require public authority, which can be supported through partnership, and where existing organizations are already positioned to contribute.

## Build Statewide Direction Around Regional Capacity

Arizona's regional differences must be accounted for the design of any statewide approach. Communities vary in their industries, education providers, workforce needs, distances, population trends, and access to services. Rural, tribal, border, northern, and metropolitan regions will apply statewide priorities in different ways.

Common goals, definitions, data expectations, and quality standards can provide statewide direction. Regional partners need staff time, useful information, technical assistance, and access to resources. Texas and North Carolina show how designated capacity can help local leaders move from shared goals to sustained implementation.

Arizona should consider who will convene partners in each region, how regional plans will connect to statewide priorities, and what minimum capacity is needed for meaningful participation.

## Connect Coordination to Visible Results

A stronger statewide approach should produce improvements that students, families, employers, and communities can recognize. Initial priorities should be sufficiently constrained so that they can be implemented well. Such priorities might include clearer pathway information, more consistent employer engagement, regional pathway maps, stronger advising, improved credential review, or shared reporting on a small number of outcomes.

Each priority should have a clear “owner” responsible for its success, a realistic implementation plan, and measures that allow leaders to assess progress. Independent evaluation can help Arizona distinguish activity from improvement and adjust its approach as evidence develops. Early results can build confidence among organizations whose participation will be essential to long-term alignment.

---

Education Forward Arizona’s interest in education-to-workforce alignment begins with students and the education systems that support them. The organization remains focused on whether young people and adults have access to strong learning, clear pathways, meaningful credentials, and opportunities to build stable and fulfilling lives.

---



## **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.

## **Authors**

Rich Nickel,  
President and CEO

Ricardo Lopez Valencia,  
Senior Vice President of Education and Workforce Alignment

This white paper was developed in partnership with  
Collaborative Communications Group.

## **Connect with us today at:**

[www.educationforwardarizona.org](http://www.educationforwardarizona.org)