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Education–to–Workforce

WHITEPAPER SERIES

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Alignment and Action: The Case for an Arizona Education–to–Workforce Plan

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Statewide Coordination Is Necessary and Should Be Formalized

Across Arizona, schools, colleges, universities, workforce organizations, employers, public agencies, nonprofits, and regional partnerships are working to connect education, training, and opportunity. Arizona also has an established workforce infrastructure, significant data capacity, statewide attainment goals, and growing attention to the relationship between education and the economy.

What remains underdeveloped is a statewide approach for connecting that work across institutions and regions over time. Coordination still depends heavily on relationships, voluntary participation, and the willingness of individual leaders and organizations to work across institutional boundaries. Those relationships are valuable, but they are difficult to sustain consistently across a system as large and varied as Arizona's. They are also vulnerable to leadership changes and shifts in institutional priorities.

A stronger, formalized approach to alignment and coordination should begin with a focus on the people the system is meant to serve. Students and families in Arizona need clearer ways to understand educational and career options, how those options connect, and where different choices can lead. They need pathways that support continued learning, meaningful work, economic mobility, and the ability to adapt as their goals and Arizona's economy evolve.

That continuum begins in early childhood, where access to high-quality learning and care can support children's development while helping parents pursue education, training, and employment. Education also serves purposes beyond preparation for a particular occupation. It develops knowledge, judgment, skills, civic capacity, and the ability to participate fully in communities. Labor-market information and employer needs can help students understand opportunities and help institutions respond to economic change. Used well, that information can strengthen educational decisions while preserving the choices available to learners and the broader purposes education serves.

Coordination can strengthen these connections, but it does not by itself determine priorities, assign responsibility, align resources, or establish what happens when progress stalls. Arizona needs a statewide education-to-workforce plan that provides a consistent, reliable basis for making those decisions and carrying them forward.

What a Statewide Plan Should Be Designed to Accomplish

The value of a statewide education-to-workforce plan should ultimately be judged by what it makes possible for students and families in Arizona. At its best, such a plan would make pathways easier to understand, preserve meaningful educational choice, clarify responsibilities across systems, connect statewide priorities with regional experience, and create a stronger basis for decisions. These improvements are necessary to ensure that students and families are practically able, not just theoretically, to take advantage of the education and workforce opportunities that are being developed throughout the state.

Make pathways easier to understand and navigate.

Arizona students and adults can pursue education and training through many routes, including career and technical education, dual enrollment, community colleges, universities, apprenticeships, industry credentials, adult education, and work-based learning. Yet those opportunities do not always appear to learners as parts of a connected system.

Students may need to know whether credits transfer, what further education a credential supports, how much a program costs, what assistance is available, and where a pathway may lead. Institutions can absorb more of that complexity by making connections among programs and opportunities easier to understand rather than leaving students and families to piece them together on their own. Learners need to understand their options and their implications while preserving opportunities to change direction, continue their education, and pursue different goals over time.

Practical approaches to achieving this outcome could include common pathway maps, statewide or regional navigation tools, stronger transfer and articulation agreements, and clearer information about credentials, costs, financial aid, and next-step opportunities. Arizona could also strengthen advising and navigation supports so that learners receive more consistent guidance as they move among schools, postsecondary institutions, training programs, and work.

Preserve educational choice while strengthening connections to opportunity.

Students benefit from information about which fields are growing, what preparation different careers require, and how education and training connect to further learning and employment. That information is most useful when considered alongside educational value, student interests, access, completion, and opportunities for longer-term advancement.

Employer perspectives can also improve how education and workforce systems respond to changing economic conditions. A more coherent system can give employers clearer ways to communicate workforce needs, participate in work-based learning, and collaborate with education partners.

Ways to strengthen these connections could include accessible labor market information, career exploration and navigation resources, employer advisory structures, sector partnerships, and expanded work-based learning. Used together, these mechanisms can give students better information about opportunity while giving employers more consistent ways to communicate changing needs to education and training partners.

Clarify responsibilities across systems.

Arizona's education-to-workforce landscape includes organizations with different missions, authorities, funding structures, and measures of success. A statewide plan can make clearer where responsibilities reside, where they intersect, and which challenges require coordinated action across more than one institution or system.

Students, families, and communities should also have meaningful ways to inform priorities and identify barriers. Their experience can help reveal whether pathways that appear connected at the system level are understandable and accessible in practice.

Greater clarity could come through shared responsibility matrices, interagency agreements, memoranda of understanding, designated leads for cross-system priorities, or governance charters that specify who convenes, who contributes information, who acts, and how unresolved issues are elevated. The appropriate mechanism may vary, but responsibilities should be explicit enough that progress does not depend primarily on personal relationships.

Connect statewide priorities with regional experience.

Arizona's regions differ in their economies, geography, populations, institutions, and available supports. A statewide plan, therefore, needs enough consistency to establish common priorities while leaving regional partners room to respond to local conditions.

That relationship should work in both directions. Statewide priorities can help regions understand where Arizona is headed, while regional experience can reveal emerging needs, implementation barriers, and approaches that may be useful elsewhere. The plan can provide a regular structure for sustaining that exchange.

Arizona could support this exchange through designated regional tables or partnerships, regional implementation plans aligned with statewide priorities, regular state-regional convenings, and formal opportunities for regions to identify barriers and inform statewide reviews. Existing regional organizations should be used where they can perform these functions effectively, avoiding unnecessary new structures.

Make evidence useful for decisions.

Arizona already has meaningful capacity to collect and analyze education, workforce, and labor-market information. The Arizona Education Progress Meter provides one existing foundation, alongside information generated by postsecondary institutions, workforce systems, economic development organizations, and other state partners.

The challenge is to use that information together to answer practical questions. Where are learners progressing, and where are they encountering barriers? Which pathways support continued education, employment, and advancement? Where do outcomes differ across regions or populations? No single measure can answer those questions. A useful statewide plan will draw on multiple forms of evidence and connect them to decisions about priorities, capacity, and investment.

Possible mechanisms include shared indicators, integrated or linked data systems, public-facing dashboards, common data definitions, and regular cross-system reviews in which leaders examine results and determine what action should follow. Clear data-governance practices can also help establish who is responsible for maintaining information, interpreting it, and bringing identified problems back for review.

Taken together, these functions provide a practical standard for the plan Arizona develops. It should make the education-to-workforce landscape easier to navigate, more responsive to students and regions, clearer about responsibility, and better able to use evidence to guide decisions. The next question is how to translate those expectations into a plan that Arizona is prepared to adopt and carry out.

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Complete, Adopt, and Implement a Statewide Education–to–Workforce Plan

A statewide plan becomes consequential when it moves from a planning exercise to an adopted strategy that institutions and leaders use to guide their work. Arizona should carry the planning process through three related stages: completion, adoption, and implementation.

- **Completing the plan** means resolving enough of the major questions about purpose, priorities, roles, measures, resources, and governance to produce a usable statewide strategy. It does not need to settle every operational detail or anticipate every future challenge. It needs sufficient clarity for participating institutions to understand what Arizona is trying to accomplish and how their responsibilities connect to the broader effort.
- **Adoption** gives the plan standing beyond the process that produced it, and the form of adoption can be determined through the planning process. Still, the objective should be to achieve broad enough recognition and commitment that the plan influences decisions across the institutions and sectors responsible for carrying it forward. Without that commitment, even a well-developed strategy may have limited influence over priorities and institutional behavior.
- **Implementation** translates the plan into decisions and action, insofar as participating organizations will need to apply their priorities through investments, programs, partnerships, policies, and other work within their respective areas of authority. The plan should also establish realistic timelines and a process for revisiting priorities as Arizona's educational needs, economy, demographics, and labor market change.

Arizona's education and workforce institutions do not need to operate under a single authority for this to work. Early childhood providers, K-12 systems, community colleges, universities, workforce entities, public agencies, employers, and regional organizations already operate under different governance structures and responsibilities. The plan can connect those roles where coordinated action is necessary while preserving the legitimate authority of the institutions responsible for carrying out the work.

The planning process will also require choices about focus. A strategy that attempts to address every education and workforce issue at once is unlikely to provide useful guidance. Arizona will need to identify a manageable set of priorities in which statewide coordination can make a meaningful difference, while retaining enough flexibility to adjust as evidence and conditions change.

Completing the plan would be a watershed moment for Arizona, one with the potential to dramatically reshape education, talent pipelines, and access to opportunities for Arizonans statewide. That being said, its effectiveness will depend on whether responsibilities remain clear after adoption, whether institutions and regions have the capacity to act, whether progress is reviewed, and whether Arizona can respond when implementation encounters barriers. Sustaining that work will require clear ownership, strong state-regional connections, adequate investment, meaningful accountability, and continued state leadership.

Give the Plan Clear Ownership and Stewardship

A statewide education-to-workforce plan will need clear ownership after adoption. Because responsibility across the continuum is distributed among many institutions, work that crosses organizational boundaries can lose momentum when no one is clearly responsible for sustaining it.

Whatever form that structure takes, it will need responsibility for the processes that make statewide coordination possible: convening participants when needed, tracking priorities and timelines, organizing shared information, connecting statewide and regional work, and elevating cross-system barriers that cannot be resolved within a single institution.

The form can follow the functions the plan requires. Stewardship might reside in a new entity, a commission, an existing organization, a state office, or another structure developed through the planning process. The essential requirement is explicit responsibility supported by sufficient authority, capacity, and resources. That stewardship role should remain distinct from the substantive authority already held by schools, colleges, universities, workforce entities, agencies, regional organizations, and other partners. Its purpose is to sustain coordination and follow-through across systems while leaving decisions about curricula, institutional budgets, hiring, local program design, and other institution-specific matters with the organizations that hold those responsibilities.

Clear ownership can also help preserve continuity as leadership changes. The plan should not depend on the continued involvement of particular elected officials, agency leaders, institutional executives, or philanthropic partners. Its priorities, routines, and accountability processes need to remain understandable and usable as individuals and administrations change.

The stewardship function should itself be assessed by what it enables. Relevant questions include whether responsibilities remain clear, commitments receive follow-through, regional concerns reach the appropriate statewide actors, and cross-system barriers are addressed rather than repeatedly resurfacing without resolution.

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Connect Statewide Priorities With Regional Action

A statewide education-to-workforce plan should provide coherence across Arizona while recognizing that regions face different conditions and will often pursue priorities in different ways. Regional economies, populations, geography, institutions, and access to education and support services vary substantially, shaping both opportunity and implementation.

Local and regional partnerships are often where education-to-workforce alignment becomes tangible. Schools, community colleges, workforce boards, employers, chambers, nonprofits, local governments, tribal entities, and community organizations see firsthand where pathways are working, where students and workers encounter barriers, and where local labor-market conditions are changing.

The statewide plan should draw on that knowledge while establishing enough consistency to make common priorities, measures, and responsibilities understandable. Regions need room to determine how those priorities are pursued in light of local conditions and existing partnerships. Statewide actors can contribute broader labor-market and education information, common measures, policy support, access to resources, and visibility into trends that cross regional boundaries. Regional partners can identify assumptions that do not fit local circumstances, surface emerging needs, and show where implementation is succeeding or falling short.

The plan should create regular ways for regional experience to inform statewide decisions. Regions should be able to elevate recurring barriers, contribute to progress reviews, and share approaches that may be useful elsewhere. Arizona can build on existing regional partnerships wherever possible rather than create new structures solely to support the statewide plan.

This connection has practical consequences for learners. A pathway that appears strong on paper may have limited value if students cannot reach it, afford it, transfer credits from it, obtain the supports needed to complete it, or understand where it leads. Those barriers will look different across metropolitan, rural, tribal, border, and other communities.

While some elements of the plan will benefit from statewide consistency, including goals, measures, transparency, and responsibility for follow-through, other elements, such as program design, partnership structure, sector emphasis, and implementation strategy, should remain responsive to regional conditions. The objective is a statewide strategy strong enough to provide coherence while giving regions meaningful influence over how priorities are translated into action.

Invest in the Plan and Commit to its Implementation

A statewide education-to-workforce plan will create expectations for institutions and partners that already operate with different funding sources, statutory responsibilities, staffing levels, and local capacity. Some of the work may fit within existing responsibilities. Other priorities may require additional staff time, data infrastructure, technical assistance, partnership development, or changes in program delivery. Those needs should be considered as part of the implementation.

Arizona's formal workforce system provides a useful illustration. WIOA pairs defined public responsibilities with resources for career and training services and with measures intended to assess results. A statewide education-to-workforce plan would operate across a much broader set of institutions. It would serve a different purpose, but the underlying principle applies: expectations are more likely to produce results when organizations have the capacity to meet them.

Investment needs will vary. The structure responsible for stewardship will require predictable operating support. Institutions and regional partnerships may need additional resources when new responsibilities exceed their existing capacity, particularly in communities with more limited staffing and infrastructure. The plan may also identify gaps in pathways, advising, data systems, student supports, or other areas where targeted investment could expand opportunity or strengthen performance.

A practical starting point is greater visibility into the resources Arizona already deploys. Education systems, workforce programs, economic development organizations, state agencies, philanthropy, employers, and regional initiatives invest in different parts of the continuum, often under separate authorities and funding rules. A statewide plan can help Arizona understand how those investments relate to common priorities, where efforts reinforce one another, and where gaps remain.

Many funding decisions will appropriately remain with the institutions and public bodies that control those resources. The statewide plan can provide a stronger basis for aligning investments where interests overlap and for determining whether a persistent problem calls for better coordination, greater capacity, a policy change, a different use of existing resources, or additional investment.

Reliable support is particularly important for functions Arizona expects to continue over time. Stewardship, data use, regional engagement, and other recurring responsibilities will be difficult to sustain if they depend primarily on temporary grants, organizational goodwill, or the attention of particular leaders. Stable funding for those functions can help make statewide alignment part of the way Arizona operates over time.

Create Accountability Through Evidence and Follow–Through

To be effective, a statewide plan also needs an integrated way to determine whether agreed work is being carried out and whether conditions are improving for students and families. Arizona already has substantial education, workforce, and labor-market data that can inform such efforts. The plan should establish a manageable set of questions and measures that participants review regularly. Those measures can help Arizona understand how learners are progressing through education and training, where access or completion problems persist, how outcomes vary across regions and populations, and whether pathways support continued learning, employment, and advancement.

Accountability should be calibrated to what organizations can reasonably control and reasonably accomplish. A school system, college, agency, workforce organization, employer partner, or regional entity can be expected to fulfill the responsibilities it has accepted, contribute the agreed-upon information where appropriate, participate in necessary coordination, and respond when its work falls behind.

Broader outcomes data serve a different purpose; attainment, employment, earnings, economic mobility, and similar measures reflect the actions of multiple institutions as well as economic conditions and individual circumstances. They can help Arizona identify where the system's combined work is producing progress and where persistent disparities or barriers warrant attention.

The appropriate response will depend on what the evidence reveals. A problem may call for clearer coordination, technical assistance, additional capacity, policy or investment changes, or action by several organizations working together. Regular review should therefore lead to decisions. When an agreed responsibility is not being carried out, or a problem persists despite earlier action, the issue should remain visible, the responsibility for the next response should be clear, and Arizona should return to the evidence to determine whether conditions have improved.

Transparency can reinforce that process. Students, families, policymakers, participating institutions, funders, and communities should be able to understand the goals Arizona is pursuing, how progress is being assessed, and where further work is needed. Public reporting is most useful when it helps people understand performance and informs decisions.

The stewardship structure should be held to the same expectations for results. Its value should be evident in clearer responsibilities, sustained follow-through, stronger connections between regional and statewide work, and a greater ability to address barriers that cross institutional boundaries. In this way, accountability becomes part of implementation itself. Evidence helps Arizona understand what is working, identify where the strategy is falling short, and determine what needs to change as conditions and needs evolve.

The Role of State Leadership

A statewide education-to-workforce plan will require sustained support from Arizona's elected and public leaders. No single office or institution controls the full continuum, so leadership will need to come through the different authorities that state government, education systems, agencies, and regional partners already hold.

The Governor's Office has a particularly important role in giving the effort visibility and a champion, convening leaders across institutional boundaries, and helping resolve issues that require attention from multiple parts of state government. Executive leadership can also support interagency participation, elevate funding priorities, and reinforce education-to-workforce alignment as a statewide priority centered on educational opportunity, attainment, economic mobility, and Arizona's long-term prosperity.

The Legislature has a different role. Where implementation requires ongoing appropriations, statutory changes, or adjustments in state policy, legislative action will be necessary. Legislative oversight can also help connect public investment to statewide priorities and assess whether institutions have sufficient capacity to carry out responsibilities established through the plan.

Elected education leaders and state agencies can contribute policy expertise, data, funding streams, and implementation capacity within their areas of responsibility. Education institutions and regional partners will carry much of the work into practice. The effectiveness of the statewide plan will depend on these contributions reinforcing one another while leaving substantive decisions with the institutions that properly hold them.

State leadership will also influence whether the work lasts. Arizona should design the plan so that its priorities, responsibilities, and processes remain usable through changes in administration and institutional leadership. Continuity will depend on broad participation, clear stewardship, reliable resources, and demonstrated value rather than the continued involvement of particular individuals. All told, these complementary roles can create the conditions for the plan to be completed, adopted, resourced, and carried forward. Public authority can support the work while respecting the distributed governance that characterizes Arizona's education-to-workforce landscape.

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Considerations for Moving Forward

Arizona has an opportunity to turn growing agreement on the need for stronger education-to-workforce alignment into a statewide strategy that can guide action over time. The work now underway to develop an education and talent plan for the state provides a timely vehicle for doing so. Education Forward Arizona recommends that the planning process address three priorities.

1. Complete, adopt, and implement a statewide education-to-workforce plan

The plan should establish a clear purpose, a manageable set of statewide priorities and outcomes, defined responsibilities, realistic timelines, and a process for reviewing progress and adapting as conditions change. Student and family opportunity should remain central, with labor-market evidence informing decisions alongside educational value, learner choice, regional conditions, and opportunities for continued learning and advancement.

2. Establish clear ownership and stewardship for implementation

The planning process should determine where responsibility for sustaining the plan will reside and what governance, authority, capacity, and resources the function requires. Arizona should know who is responsible for maintaining coordination, tracking progress, connecting statewide and regional efforts, and ensuring that issues that cross institutional boundaries continue to receive attention.

3. Connect the plan to resources, measurement, and accountability

Responsibilities established through the plan should be matched with realistic implementation capacity. Arizona should also establish a manageable set of measures, review them regularly, and use the results to inform decisions. When agreed work falls behind or evidence identifies a persistent barrier, responsibility for the next response should be clear. Together, these priorities would give Arizona a practical basis for sustaining the work after the initial planning process concludes.

A Leadership Opportunity for Arizona

Arizona has reached a point where stronger coordination can be translated into a statewide strategy that institutions and leaders are prepared to use. The state has substantial expertise, programs, partnerships, data, and regional capacity to build from. A statewide education-to-workforce plan can provide a more coherent way to connect those assets around priorities that matter to students, families, communities, and Arizona's future.

The impact of a formalized plan can be transformational for Arizona. Ensuring that the plan is adopted and implemented with the necessary resources and support has the potential to meaningfully expand access to educational and workforce opportunities and, in so doing, reinforce the talent pipeline on which Arizona businesses and industries depend. Students and families should be better able to understand and navigate education and career pathways. Institutions and regions should have greater clarity about where their responsibilities intersect. State leaders should have a stronger basis for deciding where policy attention and investment are needed. A plan that helps Arizona make those connections more consistently can turn stronger alignment into an ongoing way of working that taps into the vast potential in our state.

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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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