



# State Policy Actions for Expanding Career Navigation and Personalized Guidance for Young People

## AT A GLANCE

This policy agenda offers eight recommendations of policy strategies states can adopt to improve and expand career navigation services, particularly personalized career guidance, for 16-to-24-year-olds.

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## About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org).

## About the ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF

The ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF empowers young people ages 16-24 to better understand and navigate quality education and career pathways after high school by providing access to resources and opportunities that will lead them to meaningful, quality jobs.



# Introduction

Many young people leave high school without clarity on how to navigate their career options and choose from among the vast array of available postsecondary education and training programs that may prepare them for the world of work. In a recent [survey](#) commissioned by American Student Assistance (ASA) and Jobs for the Future (JFF), less than half (47%) of respondents who are members of Gen Z (people born between 1997 and 2012) said they had enough information to determine the best plan for themselves after high school, and 65% said they “fear there is too much risk associated with choosing the wrong nondegree postsecondary path.” The process of exploring postsecondary employment and education opportunities, choosing and accessing a career path, and applying for jobs can feel chaotic and confusing. And the

experience can be particularly challenging for young people who lack direct exposure to work experiences, don’t have strong professional networks, have limited financial resources, and lack access to individualized support services, making it difficult to find and enter career fields that are personally and economically rewarding.

In a recent [study](#) JFF carried out in partnership with the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup, only about one-third of 1,327 Gen Z students who participated in an online survey said that they knew “a great deal” or “a lot” about working at a paid job or earning a bachelor’s degree when they were asked to describe their overall awareness of different postsecondary pathways. Fewer than one in five of the respondents said they knew “a lot” or



“a great deal” when asked about their awareness of pathways that included education and training options other than a four-year degree, including certificate programs or apprenticeships. Their limited knowledge of those pathways may impact their self-perceptions of how well prepared they are to pursue them. In fact, less than 30% of the survey respondents said that they are “very prepared” to pursue any path after high school, such as directly entering the workforce, acquiring an associate’s degree or a bachelor’s degree, or completing a work-based learning experience.

Failure to take action to improve and expand the career navigation services and resources available to young people could have profound consequences, and JFF research suggests that many Americans agree that more must be done to help young people prepare for their futures. In an October 2024 [survey of registered voters](#) that we carried out in partnership with Morning Consult, 84% of all respondents (self-described Republicans, Democrats, and independents) said they favor policy action to provide better guidance to people to help them find education, training, and career options that fit their needs and lead to jobs that pay family-sustaining wages. In addition, nearly 73% of respondents who identified as members of Gen Z said it’s important for elected officials

to take action to ensure that education and job training programs prepare people for careers.

Policy is crucial in creating and maintaining a modern career navigation system that benefits young people, employers, and the economy. The ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF and JFF’s Policy & Advocacy team recently conducted a nationwide scan of policies supporting career navigation in all 50 states, and the report in which we published our findings, [How State Policy Can Transform Career Navigation for Young People: A 50-State Analysis](#), emphasizes the need for states to build more effective career navigation systems to better meet the needs of all young people. It also analyzes the extent to which each state has enacted the policies necessary to achieve that goal across four key areas: actionable information, personalized guidance, work-based learning, and short-term credentials. In addition, it reviews policies defining quality standards for career counseling and work-based learning experiences, mandating the provision of professional development opportunities for practitioners, earmarking funding and creating financial incentives for key institutions and actors, and establishing statewide support infrastructures like intermediaries to support employer partnerships.

## A Need for Progress on Policies Promoting Personalized Guidance Services

The ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF's [analysis](#) of policies supporting career navigation in all 50 states found that state policymakers aren't using all the tools available to them to promote the development of comprehensive and effective career navigation systems.

For example, our scan reported findings for three types of policies that would help drive the creation of strong statewide ecosystems offering personalized guidance for workers and learners, but we found that no state has adopted all three. Specifically, the policy measures focused on:

1. Establishing quality standards for career counseling to help practitioners use evidence-based strategies to improve their advising efforts
2. Encouraging/requiring career counseling practitioners to participate in targeted professional development programs to improve their skills and expertise, and
3. Promoting the use of federal Perkins V state leadership funds to improve and expand access to career guidance programs.

Most states have only adopted one of those three policies, and only 14 states have adopted two. This lack of policy action can have a significant effect on the availability and quality of personalized career guidance and supports.

Additionally, if data for all 50 states were available, we'd also want to know how many states have:

1. Set aligned standards for career coaching at all levels and in all systems and settings (including K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce development, and community-based organizations) and provide targeted professional development for career counseling and advisement across all education and workforce development systems
2. Developed a statewide career navigation technology tool that is made available to young people and their families and is utilized by stakeholders across systems, and
3. Leveraged a diverse set of federal education, workforce, and human services funding streams to support career coaches and counselors across various systems.

The scan found that few states have adopted most of the policies that we believe create the conditions for a comprehensive and effective career navigation system across those four areas. In particular, it found that there is an opportunity for more and higher-quality policy action to support young people's access to personalized career guidance from trusted career navigation practitioners across education, workforce, and community settings.

For the purposes of this policy agenda, we use “career navigation practitioners” as an umbrella term referring to the many professionals whose role is to support 16-to-24-year-olds navigating education and career pathways. These individuals include teachers, school counselors, dedicated career coaches and navigators, mentors, and case managers. Career navigation practitioners can help young people clarify their education and career goals, acquire the skills they need to pursue careers they love, connect to other services and supports as needed, and choose education and career options that reflect their individual interests and lead to economic advancement. Depending on where they work and what other responsibilities they have, these professionals may engage young people in career navigation activities as their primary or secondary role and may require different levels of expertise and competencies based on the services and supports they provide.

Career navigation practitioners are better positioned than many other professionals to help young people navigate their career and education options, regardless of their circumstances. With the proper training and support, they can ensure that young people receive education and career guidance that is responsive to a dynamic economic

landscape, allows for individual choice, offers connections to broader ecosystem resources, provides clear and relevant information, and emphasizes the importance of relationships and networks. However, despite their potential to have a positive impact on the lives of young people, our research shows that these practitioners struggle to provide guidance on the wide range of postsecondary and career options. In a recent ASA Center for Career Navigation JFF [survey](#) of nearly 350 career navigation practitioners, 41.4% of the respondents reported that they were “not at all confident” or “only somewhat confident” in helping learners navigate career pathways that don’t include four-year college degrees, despite the fact that a growing number of young people are expressing interest in those pathways.

This policy agenda offers eight recommendations of policy strategies states can pursue to expand high-quality career navigation services, particularly personalized career guidance, for 16-to-24-year-olds. The recommendations are based on findings from our recent comprehensive scan of policies impacting career navigation in all 50 states and on the insights and lessons learned JFF has gained through years of work with education and workforce leaders across the country to build education-to-career pathways that are supported by cross-system partnerships and effective policy measures. By adopting these recommendations, states can build modern and effective career navigation systems that help young people ages 16-24 connect with well-trained, culturally competent practitioners to access key information, use available financial supports, and pursue education and career pathways that are meaningfully connected to their skills and interests.

# How State Policymakers Can Kickstart Career Navigation Policy Reforms

This section features detailed discussions of our first two policy recommendations, which focus on establishing an overall vision for career navigation and assessing current state progress before modifying career navigation systems.

## Recommendation 1



**Craft a statewide vision for career navigation that emphasizes multiple pathways to career success and focuses on cross-system collaboration and innovation.**

Career navigation is a complex and multifaceted lifelong endeavor. It involves a set of interconnected, yet often nonlinear, activities—such as exploring jobs and industries, planning future steps, and developing new skills—to prepare for and make informed decisions about transitions that lead to quality jobs, career advancement, and sustainable career pathways in a dynamic economic landscape. Effective career navigation requires people to be self-directed while also using services and resources available through both established education and workforce development systems and their personal networks of social and professional contacts. Career decisions are extremely personal, and career navigation practitioners must recognize that the supports and resources young people need should be customized to each individual's unique circumstances.

Because career navigation is a complex process that involves so many different institutions and stakeholders, it can't be regulated by a single law or rule at the federal or state level. Nor can it be administered by a single entity. That means policymakers need to take a holistic approach and use multiple regulatory and administrative levers to effect the change necessary to support the development of an effective career navigation ecosystem that meets the needs of today's workers and learners.

States would benefit from having a comprehensive, forward-looking vision for career navigation that aligns and promotes collaboration among all of the relevant programs, services, and organizations in both the public and private sectors. This vision should identify areas for prioritization, with an eye toward meeting the most pressing needs (such as improving access to services for members of populations that may face





barriers limiting their ability to navigate current education and career pathways). It should also include incentives for practitioners to buy into it. Without a central vision that includes such incentives, stakeholders are unlikely to agree to work together in a strategic way that benefits learners and workers.

Every state should consider developing a vision that does the following:

- Clearly defines what high-quality career navigation services are and conveys the ways in which those services can support the state's economic development. Definitions should include a list of essential activities for practitioners to engage in alongside anticipated outcomes. Examples of those activities might include developing advising plans for individual workers and learners to help make informed decisions about course selection and engage in initial career exploration activities, offering individuals opportunities to explore career and postsecondary education options, increasing awareness of labor market trends and current employment opportunities, embedding rigorous academic instruction into career navigation activities, supporting individuals' efforts to acquire skills relevant to occupations that interest them, and developing work-based learning opportunities.
- Adopts a specific statewide goal for the expansion of career navigation services to ensure that all young people throughout the state have access to and are taking advantage of career navigation services and resources. The goal should include targets for progress by specific populations of clients, including, for example, young people who are disconnected from work and learning, have criminal records, or are experiencing housing

insecurity, as well as Black and Latine youth and others who are members of populations that are underrepresented in quality jobs.

- Encourages the collection of robust data on the quality of all secondary and postsecondary programs (including both degree and nondegree options) and requires that this data be disseminated widely to ensure that it is used for career navigation services. Examples of the type of information that should be collected and shared include disaggregated data on learners' earnings and employment, education-to-employment statistics, and regional labor market information.
- Aligns or integrates with the state's broader education and workforce goals and initiatives, such as work-based learning experiences, career and technical education programs, and college and career pathways.
- Provides (or commits to developing) resources, supports, or an implementation framework that can give practitioners incentives for embracing the vision working to achieve its goals.

Efforts to develop and promote the state's vision should be led by the governor's office, with the administration serving as an authoritative and persuasive champion of the importance of scaling high-quality career navigation services and supports across the state's various systems and sectors. States could also establish a cabinet- or executive-level position to lead this work through legislation action or executive order. Another option would be to tap an existing entity, like a P-20 council, to develop and promote the vision.



## State Spotlight: Indiana

In Indiana, legislation known as House Enrolled Act 1002 of 2023 required the state's Commission for Higher Education to "create career planning and coaching standards" to guide "curriculum instructions for all students concerning career awareness." The commission worked with the Indiana Department of Education and other stakeholders to develop the state's [Career Coaching Framework](#), which outlines career exploration, engagement, and experience activities that students in different grade levels should have access to. These activities include things like completing a career interest assessment, participating in work-based learning experiences, and attending one career coaching session with a career navigation practitioner annually. After completing the framework, the commission awarded \$25 million in [Career Coaching Grants](#) to 28 organizations (including universities, community colleges, workforce investment boards, and community-based organizations) through the end of 2025 to "guide students toward college and career readiness milestones by way of structured career coaching sessions, support, and events." The state also created an online platform called the [Indiana Career Explorer](#), which people of all ages can use to explore industries and careers based on their interests and identify education and training opportunities in their area.

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## Recommendation 2



### **Review existing career navigation services and supports across the state to improve, integrate, and align efforts for providing high-quality personalized guidance to young people ages 16 to 24.**

As states develop their visions for career navigation, they would benefit from an in-depth review and assessment of the personalized career guidance services and supports currently provided to 16-to-24-year-olds to determine what exists, how it's being funded, whether there are any gaps in service—or any duplication of effort, and whether current programs are effectively addressing the needs of all young people.

Reviews help leaders assess whether additional policy supports and resources are needed to achieve their statewide vision and take full advantage of the provisions in current federal and state laws that support career navigation. For example, states can tap a wide range of federal funding streams to support career navigation initiatives. Some examples include the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program created in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the state leadership activities authorized under the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), the Higher Education Act's Strengthening Institutions program, investments in youth workforce programs authorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) Employment and Training program, and the career services and supports that are part of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. This is all in addition to what states may already provide with dedicated state funding. However, because these funding streams are implemented across various state agencies, it can be difficult for states to effectively and efficiently build a comprehensive career navigation system that supports all young people without first knowing what is already being provided and what is currently missing. This is especially critical because the resources available through the funding streams are limited, state revenue levels can vary from year to year, and taxpayers expect public funds to be used efficiently and effectively.

## Career Navigation Services and Supports States Could Review

States could review the career navigation services and supports below in terms of their goals, populations served, funding levels and sources, and available outcomes data:

- Career exploration, mapping, and exposure activities
- Academic and career counseling and planning
- Mentoring and networking
- Assessments to identify student aptitudes and career interests
- Skill development (including career navigation, entrepreneurial, and occupational skills)
- Job search support
- Paid and unpaid work experiences
- Postsecondary preparation and transition

Reviews may also cover supplementation information related to:

- Availability and use of longitudinal data and labor market information in advising activities
- Technical tools and systems that educational institutions use in career advising programs and services
- Counselor certification requirements and professional development opportunities
- Intermediaries and other statewide infrastructure

One effective way to ensure that the reviews are comprehensive is for the governor's office to create a task force or direct multiple agencies to work together to review the state's current career navigation services, work-based learning offerings, and related efforts, including those that are funded by both federal and state sources. This review should inform state leaders on which programs provide career navigation activities, the goals of these programs, the populations they serve, their funding levels and sources, and whether they are achieving intended outcomes. The review should also look at information about whether there are intermediaries or other community-based organizations beyond direct service providers that support career navigation activities. At the conclusion of such a review, a task force or set of agencies should issue a report to the governor's office and/or state legislature that includes information regarding the findings of the review and recommendations to streamline, improve, and expand statewide career navigation efforts. The box above offers a rundown of the kinds of services and supports that state leaders could examine through this process.



States should consider engaging in activities like these as part of their reviews:

- A listening tour of key stakeholders to learn more about the current state of career navigation across the state. Participants should include at minimum leaders of the state's departments of K-12 education, higher education, and workforce and economic development systems, representatives of the governor's office, in-state career navigation practitioners representing all areas of the state (rural, urban, and suburban), researchers, leaders of nonprofits (such as postsecondary attainment organizations and other community-based organizations), intermediaries, and employers, as well as educators, leaders of secondary and postsecondary institutions, and students and their families.
- A closer look at whether the state has quality standards for career counseling and advisement at all levels and in all settings (K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce development, and community-based organizations, for example), provides targeted professional development for career counseling and advising professionals in all systems, and where these elements align with the state's overarching education and workforce goals as articulated by key stakeholders.



### State Spotlight: Colorado

In Colorado, officials found that the state had more than a dozen programs that provided students with workforce and postsecondary education readiness services, and that the programs were difficult to navigate and not available to all learners. To address that situation, Colorado in 2022 passed [House Bill 22-1215](#), which created the Secondary, Postsecondary, and Work-based Learning Integration Task Force, whose mission is to “develop and recommend policies, laws and rules to support the equitable and sustainable expansion and alignment of programs that integrate secondary, postsecondary, and work-based learning opportunities in all regions of the state.” The task force was [required](#) to “[take] into account every existing and potential funding sources” and “design policy recommendations that . . . address implications for existing programs.” After convening stakeholders from across the state, the task force released several [recommendations](#) on ways to simplify and expand access to postsecondary and workforce readiness in every region of the state. One recommendation explicitly focused on investing in “personalized career navigational support by prioritizing and professionalizing the function of career coaching in education and workforce development systems and in community settings.” In 2025, the Colorado General Assembly passed a [bill](#) that included many of the task force's recommendations, such as placing all the state's postsecondary and workforce readiness programs under a single umbrella at the Colorado Department of Education to “reduce administrative burden and improve accessibility,” and creating an innovation fund to support program startup and expansion, particularly in areas underserved by public and private systems and institutions.

# How State Policymakers Can Strengthen and Sustain Effective Statewide Career Navigation Systems

This section features detailed discussions of our remaining six policy recommendations, which focus on strategies for building career navigation systems and bolstering personalized career guidance supports.

## Recommendation 3



**Invest in and expand access to career navigation practices that can provide high-quality personalized guidance, regardless of setting.**

Personalized guidance and supports are effective across many settings. For example, [multiple research studies](#) show that access to school counselors is linked to improved student outcomes. One finding is that lowering student-to-counselor ratios increases the likelihood of students having conversations with their counselors regarding their postsecondary plans. And an [evaluation](#) of adult workforce programs found that intensive services—such as assessments, coaching, career counseling, and service referrals—were associated with increases in participant earnings over a three-year follow-up period. Meanwhile, a [review](#) of postsecondary advising evaluations found that advising helped students progress through college and attain postsecondary degrees.

Unfortunately, the staff capacity needed to provide effective career navigation supports is lacking across systems. For example, [17% of U.S. high schools](#) (serving approximately 643,700 students) don't have a school counselor, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education. The national average student-to-school-counselor ratio is 376 students for every one school counselor, and the [recommended ratio](#) is 250-to-1. And since today's counselors juggle multiple responsibilities—from supporting students with their academic and mental health needs to various administrative tasks—they are much less likely to have the time and capacity to help students plan for their postsecondary education and career aspirations.

This lack of capacity is also true for [SNAP Education and Training administrative staff](#), who often struggle to forge strong partnerships with local workforce development boards and regularly face high workloads when referring eligible SNAP recipients to SNAP Education and Training programs because they lack

sufficient bandwidth and must juggle completing priorities. As a [result](#), these offices may struggle to recruit students who are eligible for SNAP Education and Training program supports, even though the results of pilot initiatives have shown that work-based learning experiences offered through SNAP E&T resulted in participants acquiring new skills and finding new jobs.

States should do the following:

- Tap all available federal funding streams (made available through legislation and programs such as ESSA, the Higher Education Act, Perkins V, WIOA, SNAP, and TANF) to expand the number of career navigation practitioners across various systems, including workforce development and secondary and postsecondary education.
- Provide additional dedicated state funding to expand the number of career navigation practitioners available to young people across systems.



### State Spotlight: Mississippi

Mississippi's legislature [authorized](#) funding for a new career coaching strategy in 2022 and appropriated an additional \$15 million in general funds in 2024 for the state's Career Coaching program to expand the number of career coaches available to help students find and access education and career pathways of interest and pursue work-based learning opportunities. With these investments, Mississippi had a total of 203 career coaches statewide as of the 2024-25 school year. AccelerateMS, an initiative of the state's Office of Workforce Development, [estimated](#) that by the end of the 2024-25 academic year, these career coaches had facilitated more than 2,300 job shadow opportunities, helped students complete more than 4,300 college applications and 2,100 job applications, and engaged more than 38,000 students in personalized guidance sessions regarding their postsecondary plans.

## Recommendation 4



**Integrate technology tools or platforms into practitioners' interactions with students so that they take a people-centered, technology-enabled approach to personalized guidance.**

States are collecting increasingly large amounts of data regarding the various career options available to workers and learners, including information about how specific postsecondary and workforce training programs prepare students for those careers and whether these programs deliver a good return on investment. However, this information is often published in many different places and in a variety of formats, so students, their families, and career navigation practitioners may find it difficult to access and use the data.

Statewide use of integrated technology tools and platforms can make it possible to house all of this information in one place, where it can be easily accessed alongside other kinds of career navigation resources, like online training courses, goal-setting tools, personalized career and academic plans, and notes from students' interactions with counselors across multiple settings. States can build their own statewide platforms for housing information about postsecondary and workforce training programs and outcomes, or hire third-party tech consultants to do it. To ensure that these platforms are effective, officials should ask young people to help test them and provide feedback about the kinds of features and functionality they are most likely to find useful. States should also offer career navigation practitioners training to ensure they know how to use these systems to offer service and enhance their one-on-one interactions with students.

States should do the following:

- Deploy integrated statewide technology systems and tools that enhance counselors' capacity to provide young people with timely and accurate data about regional postsecondary opportunities and labor market needs, associated program costs, and program outcomes. These tools should be implemented across all systems, and they should all use the same labor-market data so that young people will experience seamless transitions as they move between systems.
- Ensure that practitioners are able to use technology (including [artificial intelligence](#)) effectively to handle routine tasks so they have more time available to provide personalized supports when they engage in one-on-one interactions with workers and learners, particularly those who are members of populations facing barriers to economic advancement.
- Integrate, publish, and disaggregate data on the employment and earnings outcomes of learners who complete secondary and postsecondary education programs. This information can be published on an interactive resource that allows learners to see “education-to-opportunity” statistics for various systems and institutions so they can make informed decisions about the education and career pathways they choose.



## State Spotlight: North Dakota

Leaders of the North Dakota Department of Career and Technical Education and the state's RUPrepareND education and career planning initiative partnered with [CareerViewXR](#), a company that has developed a web-based career exploration platform offering interactive 360-degree tours of workplaces and companion virtual reality videos of various career experiences for middle and high school students. Students across the state can use virtual reality headsets to explore what it's like to work in more than [75 jobs](#) (including wind turbine technician, dental hygienist, electrician, and respiratory therapist). North Dakota's embrace of technology is particularly helpful for students in rural areas who may have limited opportunities to take part in in-person career exploration activities because their communities aren't home to large numbers of employers. After [piloting](#) the technology and receiving positive feedback from students, rural districts are expanding their use of the systems. The state provides training to K-12 faculty and staff members to ensure that school systems can deploy the platform and use it effectively.



## Recommendation 5



### **Adopt quality standards for career counseling and advising across systems and invest in professional development to effectively implement best practices.**

It is critical that staff providing career navigation services have ongoing opportunities to improve and expand their skills and expertise so they're able to offer all students and jobseekers reliable, timely, and customized advice. This is particularly true for those who work with people who face unique barriers to employment, such as young people with criminal records. A record can draw additional scrutiny from employers and hinder a young person's entry into certain careers. As a result, these jobseekers may need tailored guidance from practitioners to understand all the criteria they must meet in order to be hired.

The ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF's recent scan of career navigation policies in all 50 states revealed that there's a strong need for more rigorous quality standards for services provided and expanded training and education opportunities for practitioners. We found that only 17 states currently provide targeted professional development for career counselors working at the secondary level, while just 21 states use federal Perkins V state leadership funds to improve career guidance programs, and only six states have implemented quality standards for career counseling and advisement at the secondary level. These findings raise questions about the type and quality of professional development, and they give rise to concerns that many students aren't receiving high-quality evidence-informed services. States should adopt quality standards that encourage, or even incentivize, practitioners to offer the right "dosage" of supports for the right period of time, use research-informed resources and toolkits, offer culturally competent guidance to all workers and learners, regardless of background, provide access to wraparound supports, and integrate work-based learning experiences and job placements into their packages of service offerings.

States should do the following:

- Set statewide quality standards for career counseling, advising, and navigation supports at all levels and in all systems and settings (K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce development, and community-based organizations, for example).
- Provide targeted professional development for career navigation practitioners across all systems to ensure that counselors and advisors have the necessary skills and expertise to provide career-connected and individualized guidance to young people in an evidence-informed manner.
- Examine the education and training provided and required of secondary and postsecondary counselors, social workers, and members of other regulated professions to ensure that their coursework helps practitioners understand and use information about regional labor market needs and all postsecondary pathways—including those that don't involve a four-year degree.

- Provide on-ramps to the career counseling and advising profession, review and, if necessary, modify hiring criteria for new career navigation practitioners in public systems (ensure that guidelines prioritize appropriate certifications and education or training backgrounds, for example), and outline the core competencies that practitioners should possess.

## State Spotlight: Colorado

In 2022, Colorado passed the [Career Advisor Training Program act](#), which allocated \$1 million from the state's general fund for the Colorado Department of Education "to provide training programs and courses to Colorado career advisors." In the context of the act, the term "career advisors" can mean school counselors or advisors in adult education programs, nonprofits, workforce centers, or higher education settings. The state's Department of Education administers the program in coordination with the departments of Higher Education and Labor and Employment, the Workforce Development Council, and the state's community college system by providing grants to training programs in all of those settings to, according to the state senate version of the [bill](#), "help existing career advisors be dynamic and understand the shifting landscape of our state and regional job needs and skills." This legislation builds on a prior Colorado professional development initiative that was interrupted by the COVID pandemic but demonstrated effectiveness in expanding the number of highly trained career advisors through a statewide evaluation.



## Recommendation 6



### **Incentivize cross-system collaboration on providing career navigation services and supports.**

Career navigation is spread across several systems and sectors, which can lead to young people experiencing haphazard supports that are unaligned, contradictory, and not beholden to uniform quality or accountability standards—if they exist at all. States should work to ensure that there is consistency in providing career navigation services and supports across settings. While these activities may vary based on the age of the worker or learner seeking services, states can ensure that practitioners across settings are held to uniform quality standards.

It's unlikely that people will receive continuous career navigation services that remain uninterrupted throughout their journeys of work and learning. States should therefore enact measures to ensure that information about individual workers and learners' goals, interests, and previously acquired skills is accessible by a broad range of practitioners and that these records aren't lost as young people age, change priorities, choose to pursue different pathways, and work with new and different kinds of practitioners as they move from one stage to the next.

Many states require secondary school students to develop education and career development goals, often through the creation of what are known as individual career and academic plans (ICAP). Unfortunately, many of JFF's partners in the education, workforce development, and policymaking sectors say that the quality and utilization of such plans vary across states and districts. Many have said that, as a result of a lack of resources and a push for standardization in implementation of these plans, there's a risk that creating an ICAP could become a "check the box" exercise rather than a thoughtful and iterative process of creating a plan that evolves as young people move from high school to postsecondary work and learning experiences and beyond.

States should do the following:

- Develop a statewide career navigation framework in partnership with leaders in secondary and postsecondary education, workforce development, business and industry, and health and human services. This framework should be in alignment with the broader statewide vision discussed earlier in this brief.
- Update the state's education and workforce development accountability performance framework(s) to encourage cross-system collaboration and partnership and provide additional incentives and supports to enable key partners to work together, specifically to support the career preparation

of young people (such as through dedicated funding for alignment opportunities, shared staffing models, or common professional development offerings).

- Revamp secondary academic and career planning processes to ensure that the process of developing and using individualized plans is thoughtful, iterative, and informed by early career awareness and exposure activities and ongoing personalized guidance. Such plans should “follow” students and encourage stronger secondary and postsecondary alignment and support, including guidelines for sharing such plans with postsecondary institutions for ongoing review as students progress in the academic and career journeys.
- Use technology platforms to ensure that career navigation activities and supports are housed in a place that is accessible to all students, regardless of their settings, and to all career navigation practitioners, so that these professionals can get a full picture of what a young person has accomplished and the pathways they’ve considered.
- Expand partnerships with community-based organizations, which are often in the best position to connect with hard-to-reach youth populations, such as those who are disconnected from education and workforce systems. These organizations can offer more targeted and effective outreach and enrollment efforts, and states can support those efforts with dedicated career coaching grants that supplement those offered to local school districts or workforce investment boards.



## State Spotlight: Arizona

The Center for the Future of Arizona created a [co-advising framework](#) to facilitate collaboration between secondary and postsecondary educators, career navigation practitioners, and other staff as they support students interested in pursuing computer science and cybersecurity career pathways. The framework outlines several activities for professionals in each of these settings to increase the number of students from populations facing barriers to economic advancement who enroll in these programs and progress along these pathways through aligned advising and learning opportunities. Some of these activities [include](#) developing individual advising plans that span secondary and postsecondary settings, offering postsecondary exploration and navigation opportunities, and helping students enroll in rigorous academic programs that span these settings (such as dual enrollment courses). The framework highlights several key priorities for secondary and postsecondary institutions that collaborate on these initiatives, including establishing the industries of focus for pathways work, determining opportunities for working with local industry partners to develop career exploration and work-based learning activities, and enlisting specialists to provide insights to drive the creation of the supports and accommodations offered to students from populations facing barriers. The Center for the Future of Arizona is using this framework to [train](#) 120 secondary and postsecondary educators who can work with students and their families to help them advance on available computer science and cybersecurity career pathways.



## Recommendation 7



### **Expand career exploration, exposure, and engagement opportunities, including for young people outside of K-12 settings.**

Young people can acquire useful career insights if they have opportunities to participate in career exploration and career exposure activities throughout their secondary and/or postsecondary journeys. Exploration activities include career fairs, industry research projects, and interest assessments, while exposure activities can include job shadows and work site tours, immersive learning experiences with simulations of job activities, mentoring, and informational interviews.

These experiences can help young people understand the variety of careers that exist, identify their career interests so they can focus their interactions with career navigation practitioners, and choose work-based learning programs (apprenticeships and other forms of on-the-job training) that they may want to pursue. Work-based learning can be especially helpful for young people who are disconnected from education and work, because it can help participants develop connections with employers, education and training programs, and other organizations that can support them on their journeys. Moreover, programs with a combination of on-the-job training and related academic instruction help participants contextualize and connect what they're learning with real-world employment opportunities. And many work-based learning programs also offer participants further wraparound services and supports that they wouldn't have been able to access otherwise.

States should do the following:

- Adopt a statewide definition of work-based learning and develop a quality framework that establishes uniform quality standards for all such programs (particularly those offered in high schools) and ensures that guidance on implementation is available to all systems and organizations that choose to develop work-based learning programs. Our nationwide scan of state career navigation policies revealed that few states are adopting quality standards for all forms of work-based learning.
- Provide funding streams dedicated to career exploration, exposure, and engagement opportunities (including time-bound grant programs and budget line items).
- Integrate career navigation experiences into all phases of students' high school pathways, with a particular emphasis on students who are less likely to have access to such opportunities.
- Support intermediary organizations that facilitate partnerships between employers and education and workforce systems to develop, sustain, and scale high-quality work-based experiences for young people.

- Take full advantage of existing public workforce system resources and designate additional funds to support community-based organizations, which are better positioned than many institutions to reach young people who are disconnected from work and learning, those who are only marginally connected to employment (gig workers, for example), young people who may be experiencing housing insecurity, those with criminal records, and young people who are or have been in the foster care system and ensure that they receive counseling, career navigation, and work-based learning opportunities. To ensure that young people make long-term use of these supports, states should consider offering participants in career-oriented programs stipends or another form of financial assistance for successful completion of activities. Such financial supports can supplement any earnings young people may forgo when they take part in career development activities and thereby act as an incentive for participation and persistence.



## State Spotlight: Texas

In 2021, the Texas state legislature required the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission (collectively known as the [Tri-Agency](#) partners) to develop a strategic framework to expand and improve work-based learning experiences. The Tri-Agency partners established an interagency working group to consider strategies for achieving that goal. The partners' three priorities were to promote the creation of efficient and flexible pathways for students to earn high-value credentials, support students at every stage of their education and as they transition into the workforce, and optimize agency collaboration and processes to meet goals for student outcomes. The working group developed a comprehensive definition or continuum of work-based learning opportunities, outlined the roles and responsibilities of various providers to promote alignment, and promoted a list of quality indicators to ensure consistent implementation of high-quality programs. The Tri-Agency partners are working to implement this framework through a range of initiatives, including through a federally-funded Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant to promote student understanding of career opportunities and pathways through new curricula and increase student access to individualized college and career advising. The three agencies are also working to better incorporate work-based learning experiences at every grade level in the Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) programs offered at 62 Texas schools.

## Recommendation 8



### **Build the research base on effective career navigation approaches by funding rigorous evaluations and implementation studies.**

More research is needed to better understand career navigation interventions that are effective in reaching all young people. Research efforts can include rigorous experimental studies, quasi-experimental designs, and additional quantitative and qualitative research. States can then incorporate the findings of these studies into state standards for practitioners in a range of settings, with quality control mechanisms to ensure practitioners achieve these standards. States should also offer all practitioners professional development opportunities and adopt outcome-based financing models that support institutions that effectively deliver evidence-informed career navigation programs.

States should do the following:

- Fund rigorous evaluations and implementation studies of career navigation services and supports to assess their quality and their ability to improve key outcomes and to determine the degree of access young people have to these offerings. Research could include comparisons of student outcomes based on the amount and intensity of career counseling and advising they receive, student surveys regarding their satisfaction with the services and supports they receive, and/or implementation studies to examine the uptake of technology tools by students and their families after practitioners start using them.
- Fund rigorous evaluations and implementation studies of early career awareness and exposure experiences to assess their quality and their ability to improve key outcomes and to determine the degree of access youth have to these offerings.
- Use existing research to establish or revise aligned standards for career coaching at all levels and in all systems and settings (K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce development, and community-based organizations, for example).



## State Spotlight: District of Columbia

District of Columbia Public Schools is partnering with the DC Education Research Collaborative and its affiliate researchers to conduct a [study](#) examining student access to [career development opportunities](#) such as career awareness and exploration activities, career and technical education courses, work-based learning programs, and postsecondary planning and support services (including career counseling). Supported by the U.S. Department of Education, the study will include a landscape analysis of available career development programs to help leaders better understand which students have access to these opportunities throughout the city. This analysis will include details about program components, the students who participate in each program, what outcomes are achieved, and how these programs are funded. After community and practitioner input, the researchers will then conduct a follow-up impact study of one of these programs to better understand its implementation, costs, and outcomes.

## Additional Supports for Career Navigation

While access to personalized career guidance supported by timely and accurate postsecondary and career information undergirds an effective career navigation system, we know more must be done to ensure that young people can access the pathways that will lead them to their career goals. Policymakers can provide free access to high-quality postsecondary education and training opportunities through institution- and grant-based funding. They can also use innovative financing approaches such as these: 1) “pay it forward” models, which allow policymakers to stretch funding to more individuals by requiring those who end up in well-paid jobs to pay for the next cohort of students; 2) “pay for success partnerships,” under which the provider offers free training to individuals and is only reimbursed if the trainees succeed in the labor market; or 3) lifelong learning accounts, which consolidate contributions from many sources to pay for qualified education and training programs.

For more information about these approaches, explore the insights and resources available through JFF’s [Financing the Future](#) initiative.



# Looking Ahead

Many young people are navigating uncharted journeys toward their futures without access to the guidance, resources, or training and education experiences they need to succeed.

While some states are making progress in efforts to enact policies that support the development of high-quality career navigation ecosystems, most have yet to adopt the full range of legislative and regulatory measures that we identified as essential in our review of career navigation policies in all 50 states.

This policy agenda offers a clear path forward on how states can assess where their career navigation policies and practices stand and what they can do to improve them. By expanding access to high-quality career navigation services—through personalized guidance, cross-sector alignment, and early career exploration and exposure—state leaders can empower young people and unlock long-term economic growth. The time to act is now.



Building a Future  
That Works  
**For Everyone**