



# The Renewed Promise of P-20 Councils

P-20 councils, since their inception, have sought to align expectations across early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary education and workforce systems and strengthen cross-sector partnerships to drive meaningful improvements for students and their families. Despite their clear goals, traditional P-20 councils have long faced challenges that can end up thwarting their efficacy. Some of the most common challenges include capacity constraints, funding shortfalls, a lack of consensus on evolving priorities, communication challenges, partisan polarization, and a lack of student and community voice in decision-making.

In short, these challenges have led us to a glaring present reality in which most states that had P-20 councils in the late 1990s and early 2000s no longer have active councils. This leaves us with one crucial question: Does this reality indicate that the value of P-20 councils has run its course?

**We believe, when designed well and positioned to help drive the state's strategic priorities, there remains significant promise in the value of P-20 councils.**

From our own research and on-the-ground work, ESG has found that a diverse set of state leaders across the country have recently redesigned their P-20 structures to address many of the aforementioned challenges to positive effect. In particular, new P-20 structures in Kentucky, Minnesota, and North Carolina are innovatively using their states' postsecondary attainment goals as north star goals to cultivate buy-in amongst a diverse constituency of education stakeholders and build momentum towards action. These states have effectively utilized their revitalized P-20 frameworks to promote promising strategies including:

- » Building shared accountability and ownership;
- » Enhancing cross-sector data use in decision-making;
- » Identifying sustainable funding and staffing; and
- » Elevating youth and community voice in decision-making.

These new approaches to P-20 collaboration deserve the attention of state leaders as they continue to develop and scale strategies that support pandemic recovery, enhance student achievement, and ensure long-term economic mobility for our nation's youth.

## Understanding P-20 Councils: Where We've Been and Where We Are Now

In 2008, nearly 40 states had active P-20 councils. These cross-sector entities began to spring up in the early 2000s through a variety of means, including gubernatorial executive orders, legislative statutes, voluntary agreements, and board of education resolutions. Furthermore, just as the creation of P-20 councils differed greatly by state, there existed drastic variation across these councils as it relates to their size, authority, funding sources, and issue focus areas. With so much early momentum around P-20 councils, it would have been hard to imagine an end to this type of innovative and collective engagement.

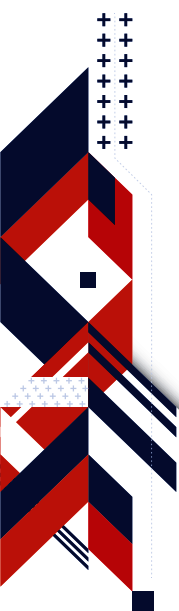
By 2017, less than 20 states had active councils; today, this figure is even fewer. As P-20 councils started to convene, the many hurdles to enacting successful policy and practice change were immediately revealed. Ultimately, no matter how a council came to fruition or whether the council was granted administrative authority or not, there are several key common challenges that plagued traditional councils and have led us to our present-day reality.

### Capacity constraints

In many states, the staff responsible for planning and coordinating P-20 work were either housed in one agency or provided by the primary fiscal agent for a finite period of time. Funding for staff was rarely provided via the state operating budget, and thus, the coordination of P-20 engagement was often the responsibility of a small group of individuals within the leading agency, who all had many other responsibilities. In some states, all planning and facilitation responsibilities even fell on the shoulders of a single person. Over the long-run, these approaches to staffing proved to be unsustainable and not conducive to effective cross-sector partnership.

### Funding shortfalls

Access to sustainable, long-term funding also became a challenge for many state P-20 councils. In instances where limited or no funding was appropriated in the state operating budget for P-20 work, a specific agency bore the full costs associated with planning, facilitating, and hosting council



meetings. To off-set these assumed costs, many councils needed to seek grants or investments from local, state, or national philanthropic organizations. While philanthropic support can be a huge asset, particularly for jumpstarting certain initiatives, grants do not continue in perpetuity, and thus, many councils were left inoperable upon the sunset of their grants.

### *Lack of consensus on priorities*

Early childhood, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce leaders are perpetually dealing with new and emergent priorities and are expected to remain attuned and responsive to the needs of their specific sector. When the priorities of the P-20 council were not centered around a shared goal, or if there were not set processes and norms for determining priorities, it was oftentimes difficult for leaders to decide where the council should focus its attention. P-20 councils also often lacked authority and were perceived as places for leaders to meet and talk, but not to take action. This often led to a lack of movement, with little to show in terms of actual recommendations, funding, or policy change.

### *Communication challenges*

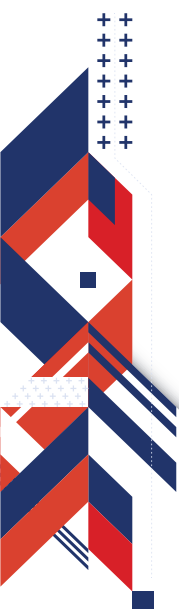
Particularly given the routine staffing and capacity limitations mentioned previously, many state P-20 councils struggled with effectively communicating about their work to the broader public, leading to a lack of awareness of the cross-sector work they were engaged in among important stakeholders, and eventually, a dissolution of buy-in among members themselves. This also led to duplication of efforts—including the establishment of other, more focused cross-sector entities—and diminished engagement among P-20 members.

### *Partisan polarization*

In many traditional P-20 councils, either state education leaders were elected or politically appointed to their positions or the council was responsible to the governor's office. This framework leaves much room for politics to enter the mix. Some councils had difficulty keeping their P-20 separate from the political environments they existed within. While it is not possible to entirely remove politics from any setting, as public education became and continued to be a topic of fierce debate, criticism, and disagreement, traditional P-20 councils were routinely left vulnerable to the same types of political polarization the country was experiencing writ large. Given the considerable lift P-20 work takes to do well at baseline, partisan disagreements in some states served as distractions and roadblocks to effective partnership across sectors and agencies.

### *Absence of diverse voices*

As research routinely demonstrates, education leadership rarely reflects the diversity of the populations it serves. There is a continued need for inclusive stakeholder engagement to gain a fundamental understanding of the needs and experiences of those being served, particularly among students and community members from Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous populations and those experiencing poverty. However, stakeholder engagement requires a considerable amount of capacity to do well, routinely, and at scale. As a result of significant funding and capacity challenges, traditional P-20 councils were often not designed or organized in ways that were conducive for meaningful and inclusive stakeholder engagement to occur.



## An Emergent Promising Practice: The Use of State Postsecondary Attainment Goals as an Unifying “North Star” for P-20 Efforts

To maximize their impact, leaders of P-20 efforts need to identify pragmatic work to tackle together. When first starting out, this can help to build proof points and enable leaders to point to “quick wins” to create momentum for the work. Collective ownership can also help sustain the work—even when “key champions,” or those who have a strong sense of passion and intrinsic motivation for the work, depart.

Today, there are 46 states that have set statewide postsecondary attainment goals to dramatically increase the proportion of working-aged adults with high-quality degrees, certificates, and other credentials. Overall, these goals have been designed to move the needle on two key outcomes that are top-of-mind for state leaders: improving educational outcomes and preparing a competitive and highly-skilled workforce.

In an era of stagnant P-20 councils, these statewide postsecondary attainment goals have given some states—including Kentucky, Minnesota, and North Carolina—an effective organizing framework to bring forth the clear focus P-20 councils need to meaningfully align expectations across the full education continuum. Given that each of these states is still in the early stages of revitalizing their P-20 efforts, and thus are still grappling with ways to build sustainable impact, they have pushed their P-20 work to a new level by utilizing their state’s postsecondary attainment goal as a new north star vision and directive for collaboration.

## KENTUCKY



### BACKGROUND

In 1999, Kentucky established a P-16 council as a collaborative effort across the state’s two state education agencies, with the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Board of Education taking turns chairing the committee every two years. With 18 members from across the education sector, the P-16 council focused its efforts on aligning high school standards, accountability, and graduation requirements, as well as teacher quality. While this statewide entity identified priorities and provided recommendations, much of the policy implementation work was delegated to autonomous regional P-16 councils, which saw varying levels of effectiveness, in part due to varying budgets. Over time, the engagement around the state P-16 council stalled.

Seeking to revitalize collaboration across Kentucky’s K-12, higher education, and workforce sectors to strengthen the state’s education pipeline, the state launched the Commonwealth Education Continuum (CEC) in January 2021. The CEC is co-chaired by Kentucky Council Postsecondary Education President Dr. Aaron Thompson, Kentucky Department of Education Commissioner Jason Glass, and Lt. Governor Jacqueline Coleman. The 28 members who sit on the CEC are a diverse group whose expertise ranges from early childhood, K-12, higher education, legislators, business, and community-based organizations. The CEC has built early momentum through the good will of participating organizations who have been united in the vision for meeting the state’s postsecondary attainment goal. Like the state’s initial council, the CEC is not currently legislatively mandated or funded through state dollars. The CEC meets quarterly to set priorities, share and discuss relevant implementation progress, and approve legislative and funding priorities that will help move the work forward.



## STAFFING

The capacity for planning and convening the CEC is primarily provided by the Council on Postsecondary Education, who has dedicated a significant portion of time across two full-time staff members. These staff members develop the annual strategy for the CEC, develop agendas and facilitation plans for CEC meetings, brief CEC leadership, develop mid-term and annual progress reports, build public awareness around CEC efforts, and coordinate advocacy and implementation efforts across agencies and regional partners.

The CEC has also established work groups consisting of subject-matter experts from across the state across a set of priority issue areas. These work groups meet monthly to conduct stakeholder engagement and analyze findings, assess existing policies and programs, and develop recommendations for new policies and programs for the CEC.

CPE also contracted with Education Strategy Group (ESG) to provide additional capacity around conducting stakeholder interviews and focus groups, providing strategic thought partnership on the development and sustainability of the CEC, and in sharing national research and best practices with members to guide the development of their recommendations.

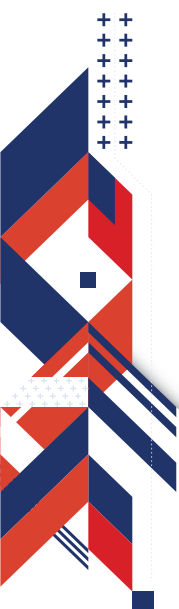
## FUNDING

In its first two years, the CEC has not had any formal funding to support its efforts. As mentioned previously, the Council on Postsecondary Education has dedicated its own staff to facilitate the work; participating organizations have also offered their own staff time to participate in CEC engagements. To implement its recommendations, Kentucky was able to leverage existing dollars from the federal stimulus, including the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and the Governors Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER). Recognizing it as a key challenge moving forward, the CEC is currently in the process of identifying more sustainable funding structures.

## PRIORITIES

The CEC has set the state's postsecondary attainment goal as its north star. As such, its work to-date has focused on smoothing the transition points for students as they progress through the education pipeline. In its first year, the Continuum specifically focused on the transition from high school to postsecondary, with work groups established around early postsecondary opportunities (AP, IB, and dual credit), transitions to postsecondary (advising, financial aid, and summer melt), and the educator workforce. In its second year, it broadened its efforts by adding a work group focused on the transition from middle to high school and on improving the first-year college experience. In its short tenure, the CEC has already dedicated over \$10 million towards implementing its recommendations, which include the following:

- » Establishing the Kentucky Advising Academy, a statewide entity for building the capacity of postsecondary advisors;
- » Launching a partnership with OneGoal, a postsecondary access and success organization working with high schools, districts and states to provide high-quality college and career planning services, to support districts across each of Kentucky's regions with developing their own college and career readiness strategies;
- » Funding and supporting institutional summer bridge programs across the state; and
- » Developing an online portal with resources, toolkits, and information for Kentucky's stakeholders on college and career readiness and transitions.



# MINNESOTA



## BACKGROUND

Minnesota's P-20 Education Partnership was codified by the legislature in 2009; this legislation defined the membership of the council, required the council to submit an annual report to the legislature, and set the charge of the council to develop recommendations to the governor and legislature to promote the educational achievement of all students. Over time, the P-20 Education Partnership struggled to maintain quorum at its meetings and faced challenges in driving meaningful policy change.

In 2019, leaders of the P-20 Education Partnership, along with representatives from the Department of Employment and Economic Development and the governor's office, participated in a convening of the Level Up Coalition, a collaborative of state and national partners led by Education Strategy Group (ESG) focused on increasing the number of high school students prepared for and successfully transitioning to postsecondary education. This convening served as a catalyst for recentring the work of the council around a shared vision to achieve the state's postsecondary attainment goal.

## STAFFING

The four lead organizations—the Minnesota Department of Education, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, the University of Minnesota, and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities—take turns every two years in chairing the council. Generally, the chair will leverage their own staff to help coordinate the council's activities. From a political standpoint, this staffing principle helps guarantee that no one leader will lead the Partnership for more than two years. With clearly defined transition points, this format helps the state avoid political challenges often associated with having one single politically appointed or elected leader managing workflows and setting priorities for an indefinite period of time. Additionally, recognizing the challenge in relying on leadership to be the primary source of capacity, Minnesota is working to hire a full-time P-20 Executive Director to lead the work.

Minnesota also established work groups to support the development of short- and long-term recommendations for cross-sector work and collaboration across its key focus areas. These work groups were staffed both by P-20 members, as well as other subject-matter experts from across the state. These recommendations have served as the basis of the P-20 Education Partnership's annual report to the legislature.

From 2020 to 2021, ESG provided strategic thought partnership to the P-20 Education Partnership's leadership and helped to coordinate the three work groups through philanthropic funding provided by the Joyce Foundation.

## FUNDING

While the P-20 Education Partnership is legislatively mandated, it does not receive dedicated funding from the state. Instead, it is incumbent on the council to request funding to support the implementation of its recommendations from the legislature during each legislative session. This is a pressing area of need for ensuring the continued impact of the P-20 Partnership in Minnesota.



### PRIORITIES

Since 2019, Minnesota has set its postsecondary attainment goal as its north star. As such, it has focused on strategies across the learner lifespan, including early childhood, Pre-K-12, postsecondary, and the workforce, starting with the transition from high school to postsecondary. The P-20 Education Partnership developed recommendations around expanding the state's cross-sector capacity, increasing awareness and support to students and families around financial aid and literacy, defining credentials of value connected to the state's labor market needs, and increasing equitable access to and success in dual credit coursework.

## NORTH CAROLINA



### BACKGROUND

MyFutureNC, now a statewide nonprofit organization focused on increasing educational attainment aligned with workforce needs, first began as a statewide commission made up of the state's most prominent leaders in education, business, and government. In 2017, MC Belk Pilon, President and Board Chair of the John M. Belk Endowment, and Margaret Spellings, then-President of the University of North Carolina System, collaborated to design a process that would engage these leaders in conversations to set an ambitious target for postsecondary attainment in the state, identify where in the education pipeline students were being lost, and determine solutions for leaders from across the education continuum to improve postsecondary access and success. The commission's work resulted in the creation of the statewide attainment goal "2 million by 2030," in which 2 million North Carolinians will have a postsecondary degree or credential by 2030.

To sustain collective ownership through the 2030 goal year, Education Strategy Group supported the commission's transition to a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, with many of the commission members assuming seats on its new board. This board is now one of the organization's strongest assets and includes leadership from prominent business leaders, philanthropists, all four education sectors—K-12, university system, community college system, and independent colleges—and leadership in the state General Assembly and governor's office. It not only brings together the decision-makers in the state to realize the state's bold attainment goal, but also sets the table for dialogue about the future of education in the state.

### STAFFING

MyFutureNC currently employs over a dozen staff members who support the organization's cross-sector work, including staff who oversee data, research, programs, and development. They also have a politically, racially, and experientially diverse Board of Commissioners with 20 members who represent K-12 and higher education, industry, and state policymakers. The Board gives feedback to the staff and meets six times a year, and an executive committee meets monthly. Additionally, the Advisory Board of Commissioners offers their expertise in priority issue areas set by MyFutureNC.





## FUNDING

The Commission and their philanthropic partners determined in 2019 that the group should live outside state government and that the philanthropies were investing in a “startup.” This work was underwritten by grants from three founding funders: The John M. Belk Endowment, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Goodnight Education Foundation. MyFutureNC has greatly benefited from having a deeply committed, in-state philanthropic partner.

## PRIORITIES

MyFutureNC has focused on strategies to support the state’s postsecondary attainment goal, especially those that affect students at key transition points in the education continuum. In particular, it leads several statewide collaboratives on each of the following:

- » Meeting the needs of adult learners;
- » Increasing college and career ready graduates;
- » Increasing FAFSA completion;
- » Driving informed decision-making through the state’s educational longitudinal data system;
- » Defining high-growth, high-demand non-degree credentials;
- » Re-engaging opportunity youth; and
- » Increasing the prominence of HBCUs.

They also empower the development of 15 local collaboratives across the state, which are supported by one of four regional impact managers staffed by myFutureNC.

In collaboration with Carolina Demography, myFutureNC also launched an [educational attainment dashboard](#), which shows the state’s progress across 19 performance indicators from Pre-K through college completion and into the labor market; the dashboard also includes county profiles to help facilitate local decision-making.





## Key Enabling Conditions for Sustaining P-20 Success

While there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for meaningful P-20 collaboration, we can learn from both the wins and challenges experienced by states engaged in P-20 efforts to identify the key enabling conditions to maximize success.



### ***Strong data capacity***

To ensure that their efforts are aligned with the most urgent needs for students and communities, P-20 councils should ground their priorities and recommendations in cross-sector data. Existing statewide longitudinal data systems can be leveraged to gather data on a set of priority indicators across the education and workforce continuum. If capacity allows, cross-sector dashboards can help stakeholders monitor and communicate progress across industries and sectors. In Arizona and North Carolina, myFutureNC and Education Forward Arizona, as statewide advocacy organizations, have fully owned the development, communication, and management of widely utilized data dashboards to much success.



### ***Sustainable funding stream***

Receiving recurring funding from the state operating budget for the P-20 council is the optimal means for ensuring sustainability. Illinois, for example, has been able to sustain its P-20 council as a result of the council being mandated by the state's legislature with clear funding provided year-over-year for its operations, including all staff activities, research, data-collection, and dissemination efforts. While potentially riskier, some states have also been successful in leveraging philanthropic dollars to fund its efforts. For example, Education Forward Arizona and myFutureNC in North Carolina have received considerable contributions from both in-state and out-of-state philanthropic partners. These contributions have allowed the organizations to operate absent significant funding constraints, and these diverse funders have granted the organizations with enough capital to continue to operate in the long-run.



### ***Sufficient capacity for leading and maintaining work***

To ensure sufficient capacity, P-20 councils should dedicate staff, ideally more than one individual, whose primary role is to help coordinate cross-sector efforts and strategically plan for and facilitate council engagements. Otherwise, the work will fall on the shoulders of leaders and staff whose day-to-day responsibilities will overwhelm their capacity to execute P-20 priorities, and thus minimize the impact of the work. Staff may be housed at one of the state agencies, as is the case in Kentucky; public higher education systems, such as in Hawaii; in the governor's office, as is the case in Illinois; or at a statewide intermediary, such as in Arizona. Overall, every state has to carefully consider the benefits and drawbacks of where they house their P-20 work, and how statutory or regulatory authority, term limits, experience, institutional stability, and funding sources can affect the work moving forward.



### ***Engaging youth and local communities in P-20 work***

In order to ensure that P-20 efforts are meeting the needs of local communities, it is imperative that leaders meaningfully lift up the voices of students, families, and practitioners in their decision-making. At a minimum, P-20 councils should conduct and analyze representative stakeholder engagement, such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Ideally, P-20 councils should grant these individuals a seat at the table, such as through including them as voting members or through establishing an advisory committee to offer insight and feedback on policy recommendations.



Illinois' P-20 council has done considerable work to engage youth and community members through its Family, Youth, and Community Engagement Committee. The committee is co-chaired by two representatives of statewide child, parent, and community advocacy organizations, and the committee's members are selected from organizations and providers in the areas of child advocacy, parent involvement, community-based services, early childhood education, out-of-school time, youth development, special needs, youth employment or workforce development, and business. They also hold monthly networking meetings for parents, caregivers, and community support members across the state which focus on capacity building, networking, sharing best practices, and empowering participants with various tools and skills needed to be able to make a greater impact in their communities.

### Key Questions for State Leaders

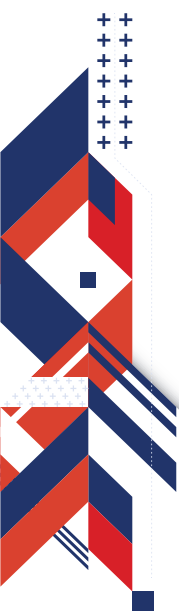
- » What might it look like for my state's postsecondary attainment goal to be used as the vision for revitalized P-20 collaboration? How might this align with existing statewide initiatives and structures?
- » Who in my state would need to be involved to get this work off the ground and ensure its long-term success? How might we dedicate staff to oversee the planning and facilitation of council engagements? How might we center the voices of students, families, and practitioners in the work?
- » Of the common challenges faced by P-20 councils, which might be most likely to disrupt any momentum for and interest in my state? What can we learn from Kentucky, Minnesota, and North Carolina to address those challenge(s)?

### A Call to Action for State Leaders

If you have been in and around the education field since the rise in popularity of traditional P-20 councils, you are likely aware of the broad skepticism that some individuals have regarding the ability of P-20 structures to sustain cross-sector collaboration over time and enact meaningful change. Truth be told, this type of intentional and inclusive decision-making remains challenging, and its success remains incumbent upon the creativity, commitment, and energy of the leaders that see value in this form of engagement and choose to move the work forward.

The creative and new approaches to P-20 work that have started to pop up across the country, especially the intentional use of postsecondary attainment goals to center the work, have shown us that there is rejuvenated excitement around a new era of P-20 collaboration. These leading states have enacted strategies with the promise to address many of the challenges that hindered the work of initial P-20 councils. State leaders should view this newfound success as an opportunity to push their state to consider how they might revitalize their own P-20 efforts. Absent intentional cross-sector alignment and partnerships provided by P-20 structures, states risk fraught communication that only serves to complicate their ability to fully understand the needs of students and local labor markets.

On the heels of a global pandemic that has disrupted the educational experiences of so many of our youth and on the verge of a new economic reality, education leaders across the full education continuum must walk in stride to ensure students have the greatest ability to succeed—from the earliest days of infancy and into the workforce. As state leaders undoubtedly continue to seek strategies to drive improvement in their state's educational and economic realities, enhanced P-20 collaboration cannot be overlooked as a primary vehicle for improving educational attainment and economic mobility for all.



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