



THE SHIFTING AMERICAN ECONOMY TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN ENGAGING FAMILIES ON THE CHANGING LABOR MARKET AND POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

Education and training beyond high school are critical for long-term career success; however, as our economy has shifted, the range of postsecondary options available to students has expanded and diversified.

While a four-year bachelor’s degree is still a valid and valuable option, it is not the only way for students to land in a family-sustaining career—nor is enrolling in a four-year degree program directly after high school a viable option for every student. As two-year degrees, apprenticeship programs, non-degree credentials, industry-recognized credentials, and other options become more readily available, the landscape that students and their families must navigate has become more complex than ever before. How are parents and families getting the information they need about different postsecondary options and how those options connect to their local labor market so that they can feel confident in supporting their students as they make important decisions about their future?

In early 2020, Education Strategy Group (ESG) kicked off a new body of work, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, to better understand and address challenges facing education leaders in communicating and engaging with families about shifts in the labor market and what those shifts mean for the ever-evolving range of postsecondary pathways available to their students.

Though we didn’t know it when the work began, the COVID-19 pandemic would soon massively disrupt the labor market and accelerate the growth in demand for a wider variety of postsecondary options. In the three-plus years since we began this work, we have had dozens of conversations with school, district, state, community, and national leaders about trends in challenges in family engagement; built an adaptable [communications toolkit](#) for communicators to use as a starting point in their efforts; and shared our research and tools with communities across the country via a series of local workshops. Through our conversations and connections with leaders across the country during a time of rapid and significant change, we’ve seen these challenges and trends evolve in real time, and have noted several key themes for those engaging with families to consider as they build their strategies.

POSTSECONDARY OPTIONS

There are many **HIGH-QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES** your students can explore that can lead to economic opportunity.

The best way to be set up for success in our shifting economy is to pursue education and training in a field or industry that is growing and pays family-sustaining wages. Education and training after high school can take many forms.

- Apprenticeships:** Apprenticeships are on-the-job learning of a skilled trade paired with postsecondary classroom learning and leads to the ability to be hired upon by the employer. They are particularly prominent in fields like construction, agriculture, and computer-aided design, as well as manufacturing, healthcare, and financial services, and job training is required in other fields.
- Certificates:** Certificates are issued by an organization with authority in a particular field — like a trade association. Though there is some variation across different fields in what certification denotes together in a certain context, they are required for entry into a particular career — like a professional emergency medical technician (EMT) certificate for paramedics.
- Credentials:** Credentials are issued by colleges and universities in specific fields and require some time to complete that an associate degree, certificate, or diploma can be used for post-high school. Credentials can be used for general and specific fields, including technical, mechanical, electrical, and many more.
- Two-Year Degrees:** A two-year associate degree typically includes both general education and career preparation courses to begin achieving economic and professional success in a particular field in the labor market. Two-year degrees can be more readily available for entry-level positions in fields like healthcare and can be used as substitutes to meet the general requirement of a bachelor’s degree.
- Four-Year Bachelor’s Degree:** A four-year bachelor’s degree is the most expensive and time-consuming of these postsecondary options that it usually the strongest foundation for long-term economic success. Bachelor’s degrees are available in a wide variety of fields and are required to enter many in some of them.

CAREER LADDER

SAMPLE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY IN INFORMATIONAL TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS

COMPUTER HARDWARE ENGINEER | COMPUTER NETWORK ARCHITECT

BACHELOR’S DEGREE, COMPUTER ENGINEERING

NETWORK AND COMPUTER SYSTEMS ADMINISTRATION

ASSOCIATE DEGREE, COMPUTER INFORMATION SYSTEMS

COMPUTER USER SUPPORT SPECIALIST

CERTIFICATE, COMP TIT II, NETWORK-

PRE-IT STUDIES PRIOR TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION, including career technical education, workforce skills, job shadowing, and internship opportunities

MULTIPLE PATHS TO SUCCESS

Even though in today’s economy, it’s necessary to have some type of education or training beyond high school, the journey through education to a fulfilling, family-sustaining career is not always linear. Identifying a clear career path after high school isn’t the only path to long-term success — one is in the only way to ultimately earn a bachelor’s degree. Students can explore different education, training, and work-based learning opportunities to acquire skills, explore, and gain the knowledge, skills, and credentials necessary for success.

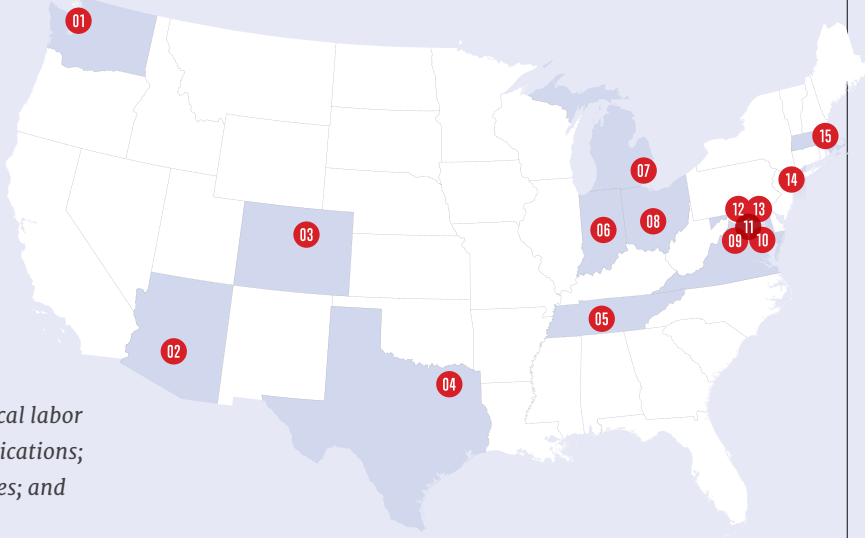
Like a trip on the subway, different pathways can run in parallel, diverge, or become as linear as possible. One with a better public transportation, engaging your state to behave can help ensure a more direct path to career success.

DIFFERENT PATHWAYS TO CAREER SUCCESS

The communications toolkit includes visuals, explainers, and customizable resources that communities can use in their efforts to engage parents and families.

ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Since building our family communications toolkit in 2021, ESG has been customizing and sharing it with communities across the country through a series of workshops and learning opportunities. During these workshops, communications and family engagement leaders from K-12 districts, local postsecondary institutions, college access and advocacy organizations, chambers of commerce, and more came together to learn about ESG’s research and resources; gain a better understanding of local labor market data in support of stronger communications; share their own work to engage with families; and collectively discuss common challenges.



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|------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| 01 Seattle | 04 Dallas | 07 Detroit | 10 Prince George’s County | 13 Baltimore |
| 02 Phoenix | 05 Nashville | 08 Columbus | 11 Washington, DC | 14 New York City |
| 03 Denver | 06 Indianapolis | 09 Fairfax County | 12 Montgomery County | 15 Boston |

Many different entities, organizations, and leaders are working toward a common goal of equipping families with better information; but those efforts can be disjointed.

The goal of empowering families with quality information to help them support their students in making informed decisions is shared by many individuals and organizations both within and outside of the education system. School and district leaders, college access and advising organizations, higher education leaders, chambers of commerce, community organizations, and many others each have a stake in making sure families have the information they need to help students succeed. However, not all of these entities interact with one another with regularity and intentionality. Consequently, their efforts to communicate with families are often not as coordinated—and therefore as impactful—as they could be.

The workshops that ESG hosted in different communities across the country deliberately brought together as many of these different stakeholders as possible to learn together, share their work, and discuss common challenges.

Though there was a real appetite for the research and tools that were shared during the workshops, attendees in all workshop locations shared that one of the biggest value-adds from these experiences was getting the many different players and perspectives together in one room to connect with one another. Communities looking to build more cohesive family engagement efforts should consider whether there is an organization or individual who can serve as a natural “hub” or convener of others in the space—whether that’s a local chamber of commerce, an advocacy group, or other entity who has relationships with the network of stakeholders connected to this work—to facilitate semi-regular gatherings or, at the very least, virtual resource-sharing to gradually build better-connected communications efforts.

Involving families in the exploration and navigational processes is crucial, but it’s important to avoid communication overload.

The consensus among leaders ESG has worked with and spoken to is that there is a strong desire among families to have better, more up-to-date information about labor market shifts and what

those shifts mean for the variety of postsecondary options available to their students. Families want to be deeply involved in supporting their children as they navigate critical decisions about their future, and they want to feel confident in their knowledge of the opportunities that exist in their communities and the pathways that can lead to those opportunities.

Schools, districts, community organizations, and other communicators recognize this desire and, in turn, want to provide this information to families in ways that resonate with and are useful to them. However, they are cognizant of the potential for communication overload with all of the other day-to-day information that schools, in particular, need to provide to parents and families. Avoiding over-saturation requires a deliberate, thoughtfully mapped communications strategy to provide families with key information at critical moments in a student’s journey. The timeline for deploying particular types of communications should be mapped against other communications families are receiving from school and district leadership to ensure that this information does not get lost or overlooked. For instance, students in the Phoenix area shared that their schools are often relying heavily on students themselves to bring home information to their families and expressed a desire for schools to streamline information and provide it directly to families at existing touch-points, such as curriculum nights, back-to-school nights, and one-on-one conferences with counselors.

Families respond to clear language, actionable next steps, and real details about real careers.

In ESG’s initial research on effective communications strategies to inform families about shifts on the labor market, we found that there was a particularly strong appetite for concrete information about particular career opportunities—including using real labor market information to provide salaries, the number of job openings, real companies hiring, and more—to make different options more concrete for families. As a result, several of the materials that we developed for our communications toolkit can be customized with local labor market information to illustrate different career fields that are growing and offer competitive wages.

At the same time, labor market information needs to be translated into plain, accessible language to ensure that families fully understand the available

opportunities and what students need to do to pursue those opportunities. New terminology about different types of postsecondary opportunities should be clearly defined, and next steps (including key deadlines, where to find additional resources, and contact information for in-person advising) should be spelled out. The Detroit Regional Chamber is partnering with Rocket Community Fund to turn the information they have about in-demand, high-value pathways and credentials in the Detroit region into a user-friendly tech tool that will help students and families clearly understand the opportunities available in the Detroit area and how to access those opportunities. Families need to feel confident that they not only have the information they need, but that they know what to do with that information to help students succeed.

As school populations diversify, leaders must take language and cultural considerations into account as they build their engagement strategies.

Communities across the country are growing more diverse, meaning that many schools and districts are now serving families with a wider range of language and cultural considerations than in years past. A significant part of empowering families with high-quality information is making sure that they can access and understand that information in the language in which they are most comfortable. ESG’s toolkit is available in English and Spanish, but there are a multitude of other languages spoken in local communities across the country. Leaders should consider whether to invest in translation of messages and information into a wider variety of languages to reach a broader range of families.

Leaders building family engagement strategies for diverse populations should also take cultural considerations into account when planning their outreach. Certain populations may respond better to different means of outreach (in-person, one-on-one conversations as opposed to social media or email outreach) or to particular trusted messengers from organizations or individuals within their specific community. Partnership with community-serving, religious, or other cultural organizations can be critical in helping school- or district-based communicators understand how to most effectively reach key populations and ensure that their communications are inclusive and effective. District leaders in the Seattle area shared that as the local population has rapidly and significantly diversified

in recent years, they have designated community liaisons who represent particular populations to reach out to parents directly—including via home visits and always in families’ native languages—to make sure they feel connected to their schools and are equipped with key resources.

Family engagement around labor market shifts and postsecondary pathways should begin before high school.

High school is too late to begin engaging and educating families about the labor market and different available postsecondary pathways. While students certainly do not need to be locked into a career choice at an early age, consensus among leaders and practitioners is that middle school is generally a good time to introduce students to different potential career paths and give them tools to explore their interests and inclinations. Giving students time and age-appropriate exploratory resources helps ensure that they understand the full range of possibilities and can zero in on their passions.

Similar principles hold true for parents. By the time students reach crucial decision-making points in their junior and senior years of high school, parents should have years of information under their belts so that they feel confident in helping to guide their students. Students in Phoenix, Detroit, and Seattle all expressed a desire for low-pressure opportunities to explore careers—and for their parents to have better information to support them in that exploration—prior to arriving in high school. Beginning to provide parents with resources and information, in formats that feel digestible, approachable, and appropriately connected to their student’s age and grade, during middle school ensures that parents have enough time to get comfortable with the range of options and are used to learning about labor market trends.

There is persistent confusion about the word “pathways” and a lack of widespread understanding of what they entail.

The word “pathway” means something different to everyone—including different stakeholders within education. There is more work to be done to build out a common understanding of the key elements of a high-quality pathway and how pathways connect to high-value labor market opportunities, and then to translate that understanding into more robust communications and messaging efforts to engage families. More comprehensive communication with parents about what pathways are and what they offer to students will help them to feel more confident about supporting their students in exploring and pursuing a wider variety of options beyond the traditional four-year bachelor’s degree path. A focus on recognizing quality and value will be key in empowering families to best support their students as they navigate their journeys to reach their goals and their potential.