

A Vision for Equitable Pathways:

Enhancing Support and Innovation
in College and Career Counseling



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A Vision for Equitable Pathways:

Enhancing Support and Innovation in College and Career Counseling

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What Are Pathways?

There are many pathways to a successful career, and every student should have access to postsecondary education and career opportunities and support to allow them to pursue degrees and certificates that align with their interests and career aspirations and see the steps needed to reach their goals. Yet, because of the quickly changing labor demands and complexity of the economic landscape, longstanding barriers to accessing high-quality opportunities, and the many demands on school counselors, choosing and navigating a pathway that will enable them to have a successful future can be hard for many students — particularly low-income, first-generation students, and students of color — and their families.

With that in mind, EdTrust and All4Ed participated in a convening in fall 2023 with other national partners to align around a national vision for federal policies to strengthen strong pathways to college and careers for students ages 16-24. Partners coalesced around a collective definition of pathways that will guide this brief:

In an ideal system, pathways comprise the full universe of intentional and supported trajectories that every learner understands and participates in as they move from adolescence through adulthood. In this system, learners would receive consistent, knowledgeable guidance, beginning in middle school, from well-qualified counselors and navigators to help them choose among many high-quality, structured experiences designed to prepare them for a successful future after they complete high school.

The range of pathways include, but are not limited to:

- Career and technical education (CTE)
- Work-based learning, including internships and apprenticeships
- Early postsecondary opportunities (e.g., advanced coursework, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, dual enrollment, and early college high school)
- Postsecondary programs of study leading to industry-recognized credentials and/or degrees

Learners are supported over time to find, experience, and stay on (or move among) any pathways that prepare them for career choices that align with their desired social, economic, and personal outcomes.



The current reality, however, is that while some well-resourced school districts offer supports for students, including high-quality advising and college and career exploration opportunities, many students — particularly students in underfunded school districts, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color — lack access to the same level of support and, as a result, are unaware of all their options.

Our Vision

A cornerstone of a great pathways system is offering navigational support and tools for transitions. In our vision, every high school nationwide would have pathways counselors to provide standardized tools and personalized support for students. In this vision, students would receive early outreach that is also accessible to their families, and students would have regular touchpoints and dedicated support in high school from an adult who has knowledge of the full range of options available to that student and capacity to connect that student to those opportunities.

Achieving our bold yet attainable vision for equitable college and career navigation will require the federal government to play a more active role. It will also necessitate sustained collective action. Without it, we risk perpetuating a system where access to essential supports is determined by zip code rather than student need — leaving far too many young people, particularly those who are already underserved, without sufficient guidance to realize their full potential. The current patchwork of programs and funding streams is inadequate to address the scale and urgency of the challenge, but the federal government can begin to create a stronger and more equitable pathways system by building on existing programs and laws. In this report, researchers from EdTrust and All4Ed explain how and spell out things that Congress and the Department of Education can do to help build a better pathways system.

The federal government must act now. Absent a comprehensive, coordinated federal response, states and districts will continue to struggle with limited resources, competing priorities, and inconsistent quality. Students will face a lottery of opportunity, with their futures dictated by the luck of their birthplace rather than their innate talents and aspirations. The economic and social costs of inaction are simply too high. As automation and globalization reshape the labor market, the demand for advanced skills and lifelong learning will only intensify. Without robust college and career navigation supports, millions of young people — especially those from low-income families, communities of color, and rural areas — will be left behind, unable to compete for the jobs of the future. The result will be widening inequality, reduced economic mobility, and a diminished sense of hope and belonging.

We cannot afford to discourage any potential learner from seeking educational opportunities. By embracing the comprehensive, multipronged approach outlined here, we can create a future in which young people are empowered with the resources, opportunities, and guidance to forge their postsecondary path successfully.

Barriers to Equitable Pathways Opportunities

To achieve this vision, we must first remove the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequities in access to high-quality pathways and information on how to navigate them, which have historically produced [inequitable](#) student outcomes. Strong systems of support are essential to connect students of color and students from low-income backgrounds to the full menu of robust postsecondary and career pathways, so they can identify options that can offer the best return on investment (whether that is college, a good job, personal satisfaction, etc.).

Barriers facing students of color and students from low-income backgrounds include:

A Lack of Access to Information

Knowledge of college and career possibilities often spreads by word of mouth and is [informed](#) by a student's network and surroundings. Because of this, historically marginalized students who do not have as much access or [exposure](#) to information about opportunities as peers with access to guidance counselors and family members who went to college are more likely to be shut out of high-quality pathways and opportunities.

New technologies are rapidly transforming the job market, but many young people, particularly students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, have smaller professional networks and [less access](#) to social capital, and [anticipate](#) pursuing jobs that are at high risk of being automated. Our education system [is not](#) doing enough to connect young people to new types of jobs and new industries or ensure that they are prepared to succeed in the 21st century workplace.

Too Few School Counselors

The dearth of school counselors, who often advise hundreds, if not thousands, of students, makes it hard for schools to connect students to high-quality opportunities. The average student-to-school counselor ratio is well above the American School Counselor Association recommendation (385:1 compared to 250:1), with higher ratios in schools serving more students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. And school counselors, along with psychologists, social workers, and therapists, are struggling to meet the [unprecedented](#) demand for mental health services in schools and [increased demands](#) on their time, including non-counseling duties, in the wake of the pandemic. Many school counselors need [additional supports and training](#) to connect students to resources and information around career preparation and exploration, high-quality work-based learning opportunities, training for in-demand careers, and new and high-value postsecondary options that can set traditionally underserved students up for postsecondary education and well-paying job opportunities.

How Pathways Counselors Can Help

Although many school counselors are stretched for resources, capacity, and time, many go above and beyond to provide students with the mental, social-emotional, and academic supports they need to be ready for life after high school. Even so, there are massive issues that stand in the way of solving the school counselor shortage anytime soon. It is nearly impossible for one school counselor to work as a general practitioner, provide grade-level supports, fulfill administrative tasks, offer mental health support, and be trained on all the many pathways to postsecondary college and careers. To ensure that traditionally underserved students have access to the full suite of pathways to college and a career, we are calling for the creation and support of highly trained pathways counselors who can work in conjunction with grade-level school counselors and educators, but whose sole job is to provide students with a clear understanding of their options and outcomes; provide personalized, regular touchpoints to help students stay on track; and offer dedicated, targeted support on students' college and career journeys.

A Lack of Data About the Return on Investment (ROI)

ROI can be difficult to track, particularly when state and local K-12 data systems may not align with postsecondary and labor data systems. Because of this, counselors, students, and families may not understand the value or ROI of certain career-connected learning opportunities and CTE pathways.

As CTE proliferates in schools, it is essential that students recognize their potential return on investment, which means school counselors and states need to be able to access and share user-friendly, disaggregated data on postsecondary and workforce outcomes for CTE concentrators — something many states lack.

Inequitable Access to High-Quality Opportunities

Racial biases held by adults in schools and unwelcoming school climates [shut out](#) students of color from rigorous coursework and high-quality career-connected learning opportunities. For example, [research from EdTrust](#) finds that high-achieving Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds who take and pass Algebra I in eighth grade still end up taking advanced math courses in high school at lower rates than their peers, and one reason may be teachers' implicit bias and failure to set high expectations or sufficiently support and challenge these students.

Further, states [distribute fewer public education funds](#) to schools that serve high percentages of students of color, and that hinders schools' ability to staff school counselors, provide career exploration activities, recruit industry professionals to teach CTE classes, and offer high-quality career-connected learning opportunities that lead to careers that pay well.

As a result, high schoolers from low-income backgrounds are [less likely](#) to be connected with internship opportunities, and Black and Latino students are [less likely](#) than white students to take career-oriented classes that lead to higher-paying careers and college degrees. Further, significant [disparities](#) in postsecondary CTE outcomes exist for students of color compared to white students.

A Legacy of Racialized Tracking in CTE

There is a need to ground CTE in the traditional injustices of academic tracking. While today's CTE differs in many ways from the [ugly historical practice](#) of racialized tracking, systemic barriers to information and access to high-quality opportunities still remain and are perpetuating [deep inequities](#) for the same groups of students who were traditionally placed on the vocational education track. It is, therefore, important that advocates, educators, and policymakers grapple with the legacy of CTE, identify existing barriers for historically underserved students, and actively work to expand access to high-quality career-connected opportunities that lead to multiple pathways to success — including college — particularly since new technologies, like AI, are disrupting the labor market and the workplace and are likely to lead certain paths and jobs to become automated or obsolete.



Additional Challenges for Student Groups With Unique Needs

Some student groups may require additional supports, information, and guidance. These students may also face stereotypes about their potential for college and careers, may feel unwelcome in school, class, or career-connected learning opportunities, and may lack in-school adult role models who look like them. These groups may also need strong family engagement to help them plan for their future. Failure to address the societal barriers facing student groups with unique needs means that schools are closing doors to their postsecondary opportunities and a more diverse workforce, and these students' distinctive perspectives and strengths are missing from classrooms.

The following student groups often face additional barriers:

Rural students: Although about [20%](#) of students attend a rural school, many institutions [bypass](#) rural students in their recruitment efforts, leaving a void of information for interested students. Additionally, many rural students may live far from college or career opportunities, while many rural schools [lack resources](#) and [qualified](#) teachers in college-prep and CTE coursework.

Students with disabilities: Many students with disabilities are ready and eager for early college and career opportunities. However, research shows that students with disabilities are often [shut out](#) of gifted programs and advanced coursework. Additionally, instructors, including CTE instructors and employers, are often [unprepared](#) to support students with disabilities or offer accommodations.

Multilingual learners: Students who take English as a Second Language (ESL) or [remedial coursework](#) that does not fulfill course requirements may have to take high-stakes placement tests in English that may not reflect their abilities or interests. Schools may lack robust ESL and counseling teams who can support and advocate for multilingual learners and their families and may lack partnerships with community organizations who can assist families and provide resources and opportunities in their native language. Multilingual learners and their families may not have access to information about pathways opportunities in their home languages.

Undocumented students: Educators and school counselors may hold assumptions about postsecondary possibilities and may be unaware of all the financing options available to undocumented students. Undocumented students may not be eligible for all employment opportunities, may be unable to [take the tests](#) that are required to obtain a credential or state license, may be unable to access funds for [dual enrollment](#) or early college, and may need to navigate and [fill out additional paperwork](#) to apply to college.

Migrant students: Migrant students and their families regularly [move](#) across state and/or district lines to perform seasonal work. As a mobile population, migrant students may work alongside their families, experience poverty, be undocumented, and experience disruptions to school. As a result, these students [may lack access](#) to social services and consistent academic support, may be missing school credits, and may need additional information about college and career pathways and additional academic preparation to reach their goals.

Justice-involved youth: Youth in the juvenile justice system, youth on probation, and students with previous experience in the justice system (justice-impacted students) face systemic barriers to [employment](#) and [state financial aid](#), and may lack access to [rigorous opportunities](#) and trained instructors, particularly in juvenile justice facilities. These students and their families require additional supports and funding to break down stigma and foster access, affordability, and belonging.

Students experiencing foster care and/or homelessness: These students are often under pressure to become [financially self-sufficient](#), and many struggle to [afford](#) postsecondary opportunities. These students also may have experienced school interruptions that hindered academic progress and they are [more likely](#) to be absent or experience school and housing instability, potentially without guidance from supportive adults or the community.

Pathways systems should extend and align across P-12, higher education, and industry, with high schools leveraging their unique role and relationship with learners to create and emphasize a shared goal of postsecondary success, provide high-quality advising, supports, and career-connected learning opportunities for students, track and share access and outcomes data, and foster local partnerships — however, high schools cannot and should not do this alone. State educational agencies (SEAs), local educational agencies (LEAs), institutions of higher education, policymakers, industry leaders and other stakeholders, should be part of the systems that support this work, with the federal government serving as the bedrock.

Strong pathways systems must proactively ensure that students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are not funneled into lower-level job opportunities that are at risk of being eliminated due to automation. Additionally, well-resourced schools should not be the only places connecting students to rigorous opportunities that lead to four-year colleges and in-demand jobs in growing industries.



5 Elements of an Ideal Pathways System & Promising Practices

To close opportunity and information gaps, students and their families need access to a clearly structured pathways system that empowers them to know their options and access resources to traverse barriers. Having dedicated pathways counselors in every school would help connect students to these systems and address the inequities in access to high-quality pathways for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. An ideal pathways system ensures that students and their families have the following:

1. **Clear choices:** a clear understanding of all their options
2. **A smart start:** early outreach before entering high school
3. **Access for all:** information that is accessible and in multiple formats
4. **Guided beginnings:** regular touchpoints with a navigator
5. **Final prep:** dedicated and targeted support in high school

There are other important elements of an ideal system, such as students receiving greater ROI and long-term economic mobility, and employers seeing more qualified employees filling high-skilled jobs, but this brief will focus on the five essential elements listed above, which emphasize navigation and counseling supports.

So far, states and districts have been leading the way in developing the systems and structures necessary to expand pathways opportunities and support students' journeys, and we highlight promising practices below that some states are using to incorporate elements of an ideal pathways system. However, implementation varies across states, and, as a result, many already underfunded districts are struggling to offer additional resources and opportunities for students. For this reason, the federal government should invest in pathways opportunities at scale to support all students and ensure that students are accessing opportunities equitably. It is in our national interest to invest in supporting pathways opportunities for students, and our system needs more resources and more equitably allocated resources, which are things the federal government is uniquely positioned to provide.

When the federal government commits to the following five outcomes, it will create systemic conditions that lead districts and service providers to implement effective and equitable college and career navigation programs and practices.



1. *Clear Choices: Students have a clear understanding of their options*

Because there is an information gap and many students access their opportunities piecemeal, systems must first create viable options for students and then intentionally lay out those options in a digestible format, along with the necessary steps students must take to access those options. Additionally, to ensure that students know about and can access their opportunities equitably, systems must be accessible, promoted, utilized, and explained clearly. This will require a federal system that funds SEAs, LEAs, community-based organizations, and institutions of higher education to train and provide pathways counselors that are knowledgeable about high-quality opportunities and have strong partnerships across higher education and with key state agencies and industry.

PROMISING PRACTICE:

The [Indiana College Core](#) lets students earn up to 30 college credits while in high school at low or no cost via Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual enrollment/dual credit courses, and credits are easily transferable across all of Indiana's public postsecondary institutions. There's an accompanying interactive planning tool, [My College Core](#), which helps students plan and track their coursework toward College Core and is a centralized resource with financial aid and transfer information. Students can share plans with school counselors, who can help students schedule classes and ensure that learners know what they need to take for results that align with their goals. The My College Core tool takes some of the guesswork out of individualized planning and ensures that families and school counselors have access to information about college-level coursework and helps students map out their next steps.

2. *A Smart Start: Students and families understand available paths before entering high school*

Strong federal systems for pathways transitions can require and support states and districts to emphasize early information sharing and partnerships with families to ensure that the full menu of options remains open to students, expand students' awareness of their options, and help connect students' academic experiences to their career goals. [Research](#) suggests that middle school is an ideal time to expose students to diverse, relevant, hands-on experiences — it may be too late to start to engage students in career exploration opportunities in high school.

PROMISING PRACTICE:

[Connecticut](#) requires districts to develop an individualized Student Success Plan (SSP) for each student that provides support in setting goals for academic, career, social, emotional, and physical development that meet rigorous high school and postsecondary expectations starting in sixth grade. The SSP emphasizes partnerships with families and caregivers to ensure that everyone is fully aware of the many benefits of taking advanced coursework. Communication is ongoing, and materials are provided in multiple languages with translators available during large, small, and personal information sessions.

3. Access for All: Information is accessible and provided in multiple formats

Pathways opportunities and supports must be translated into multiple languages; use accessible language; have tools and resources for populations with unique needs; be culturally responsive; include regular, transparent, disaggregated data collection and reporting on student enrollment, proficiency, and outcomes; leverage data-driven insights; and minimize financial and paperwork barriers. Federal legislation and guidance from the Department of Education can provide guidance on and help standardize equity guardrails, such as guaranteed translation of college and career resources.

To make sure that information is getting to all families, information should be provided in various settings and at varied times of the day, and districts and schools should be mindful to examine barriers that might prevent families from accessing this information, such as child care and transportation. Districts and service providers should also regularly assess their communication strategies to ensure that families from certain groups are not being overlooked.

PROMISING PRACTICES:

In the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), [more than 10%](#) of students are multilingual learners, and students and families speak over 115 different languages. To ensure that all parents are given a meaningful opportunity to participate in their child's education program, **DCPS has a [Language Access Unit](#)** that connects families with translation and interpretation services and provides written translations of DCPS-wide documents in various languages — including Spanish, Amharic, and Chinese — makes written translations of school-level documents available in Spanish and any other language spoken by at least 3% of the school population, and offers real-time oral translation in over 240 languages for families and groups of students or parents, as well as over-the-phone interpretation.

New York's [Notification of Advanced Coursework](#) policy requires all districts and charter schools to notify parents and students annually about the benefits of advanced coursework, existing opportunities in advanced coursework, how to prepare for and enroll in such opportunities, and available supports. Notification should be sent electronically or by mail, and also be posted on the school district's or charter school's website, and must be shared by fifth grade or the year before advanced coursework is offered by the school or district (whichever comes first).

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4. Guided Beginnings: Students explore their options through regular, early high school touchpoints

To ensure that students are navigating their options with a clear roadmap, an ideal system would train and support pathways counselors to have consistent touchpoints with ninth and 10th graders to open up additional pathways to students, rather than close them off, and make them achievable. For example, students may need to take certain prerequisite courses in ninth or 10th grade to be eligible for dual enrollment, and they should be aware of these opportunities and how to access them. This would consist of more than one annual conversation with ninth and 10th graders to plan their schedules and courseloads to allow for them to access various pathways in grades 11 and 12.

This would also mean students can receive supports early, if they are struggling. In addition, schools may offer informational seminars, so students are ready for, aware of the benefits of, and know how to access opportunities such as advanced coursework and career-connected learning. To help with this, the US Department of Education could provide guidance around best practices for guided beginnings, and legislative efforts would be needed to ensure districts have sufficient funds and clear expectations to hire and support enough navigators in schools.

PROMISING PRACTICE:

Illinois' [Postsecondary and Career Expectations \(PaCE\) Framework](#) is designed to engage students and families around college and career planning in middle and high school. It's organized around career exploration and development, postsecondary education exploration and preparation, and financial aid and literacy. The state mandates the framework and offers training opportunities and [resources](#) to help schools and districts with implementation, but districts can choose which activities students should be accessing every year. In [Community Unit School District 201](#) outside of Chicago, for example, every ninth grader must take a career assessment, attend a postsecondary options workshop, and determine eligibility for advanced courses, make a four-year plan, outline a plan for extracurricular activities, be academically on-track, and understand the relationship between high school coursework and postsecondary planning.



5. Final Prep: Staff provide dedicated and targeted support for 11th and 12th graders

Early planning and regular touchpoints are important, but to intentionally help underserved students navigate the pathways landscape successfully, students should have a dedicated counselor or counseling team who helps them determine career goals, options, and opportunities in 11th and 12th grade from a place of empowerment and not fear. Ideally, all students should have a postsecondary plan and be prepared for either college or a career, or both. Further, schools should be accountable for the outcomes of all students, whatever their path. The US Department of Education could provide guidance on best practices or a national framework for pathways navigation, and legislative efforts would be needed to ensure that districts have sufficient funds and clear expectations to hire and support enough navigators in schools.

It's important to note that many well-resourced schools [have](#) robust counseling supports, including dedicated college and/or career counselors. Ideally, all high schools would have grade level counselors and additional mental health supports, as well as a pathways or college/career counselor or counseling teams who can provide individualized, specialized support. And school personnel would have access to expertise, professional learning, supports, and tools to prepare all students for a high-quality pathways journey.

- Counseling supports should help students plan for post-graduation.
 - For students heading to college, that includes helping them to understand the admissions process, choose the right college, register and prepare for admissions testing, discuss application strategies, and apply for and understand financial aid, among other important processes.
 - For students starting a career, that includes helping them to identify interests and skills, sharing information about certifications and training opportunities and how to access them, finding work-based learning opportunities, accessing mentors, determining in-demand job fields, and connecting students with opportunities provided by local chambers of commerce or workforce boards, etc.
 - Navigation services should also provide resources and community supports, in the event that students encounter post-graduation speedbumps on their chosen path.

PROMISING PRACTICES:

In Pinellas County Schools, in Florida, every high school has a [college and career center](#) to support students in preparing for college and careers. The centers have a dedicated coordinator and trained volunteers who help students break down the college and career process into manageable pieces. Volunteers help students explore colleges, majors, careers, and military opportunities, fill out the FAFSA, apply for college, write college applications and essays, plan for financial aid, build resumes, and get connected to apprenticeship and internship opportunities. While any student can use the center during the school day, centers target high-performing, underserved students. Because the centers help students with FAFSA completion and college essays, [school counselors have more capacity](#), and students and school counselors can use their time for more substantive conversations.

PROMISING PRACTICES:

The [OneGoal Program](#) partners with districts and high schools in low-income communities nationwide to increase readiness and support students through their first year of college. The three-year program begins in junior year of high school and uses class time to help students identify and navigate paths to success and provides continuing individualized support for a full year after high school to bridge the transition. A [study](#) by the University of Chicago found that OneGoal students are 40% more likely to earn their postsecondary degrees than students from similar backgrounds.

Pathways System

The federal government has a responsibility and an opportunity to create a robust and equitable counseling and navigation system in our nation's schools. Thus far, the federal government's role has been largely piecemeal. The federal government has played a limited role in supporting college and career counseling through existing legislation and programs, but some programs, like those outlined below, *could* support pathways counseling. By strengthening existing programs and policies like those detailed below, while bolstering funding for such efforts, both Congress and the US Department of Education can open doors to opportunity and tear down barriers for learners.

K-12 Education

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), stresses the importance of college and career readiness for students. Enacted in 2015, the law allows states to include college and career counseling in their education programs. Moreover, it supports using federal funds for the professional development of school counselors and the development of programs that promote college and career readiness.

Within ESSA, several provisions offer additional avenues for support for specific student populations. For example, Title III, which focuses on supporting English learners and immigrant students, aims to ensure their academic success in the education system. Title III funds can be used to provide supplementary counseling services that enhance the language instruction educational program for multilingual learners and immigrant students, including academic, social-emotional, and career development supports. Title IV includes the Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) program, which requires that 20% of funds be used for services that include counseling. Title I and Title II also have provisions that *could* be used to provide direct college or career counseling services, as they offer some flexibility in how states and districts aid students and can be used for such services.¹



Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins)

Perkins works to increase the quality and availability of technical education within the United States. It provides funding and guidance for career counseling and advising services to assist students in making informed college and career choices. Under Perkins V authority, Congress appropriated, and US Department of Education awarded funding for a new initiative within their Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), which “provides competitive grants to partnerships between school districts, institutions of higher education (including community colleges), and employers to increase the integration and alignment of the last two years of high school and the first two years of postsecondary education.” The four pillars of the program are dual enrollment, work-based learning, workforce credentials and career advising and navigation. Grantees can use the funds for any combination of the four pillars, including exclusively for college and career advising.

Higher Education Act

The Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) and the federal TRIO programs are part of the Higher Education Act. These programs work to increase the number of students from low-income families in the higher education pipeline.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

WIOA is landmark legislation focused on strengthening and improving the nation’s public workforce system. It aims to support people, including youth, who face significant barriers to employment in high-quality jobs and careers. WIOA supports career counseling through workforce development activities, including job search assistance, career development, and vocational training. It focuses on aligning workforce development with education systems and economic growth. WIOA’s Title I Youth program funds local areas to deliver a comprehensive array of services to in-school and out-of-school youth aged 14-24, including career exploration, work-based learning experiences, and individualized college and career counseling. These WIOA-funded advising activities can help youth identify their interests and goals, understand the education and training pathways available to them, and develop the skills and competencies needed for postsecondary and career success. By partnering with schools and community organizations, WIOA Youth programs can expand access to high-quality college and career navigation supports that prepare young people, particularly those facing barriers to employment, for fulfilling futures.



The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) stresses the importance of college and career readiness for students. The law allows states to include college and career counseling in their education programs.

What Congress Can Do

Provide Enhanced Federal Support and Oversight

The federal government must ensure that all learners have equal access to comprehensive college and career counseling, regardless of their geographic or demographic context. **A new grant or funding stream could create a standardized definition of pathways counseling for participating states and districts.** Ideally, this would be uniform for all schools and districts but would require funding to ensure feasibility. Without a new program, standardization could be achieved by amending ESSA to include clear guidelines and expectations for college and career counseling. This could involve specifying required components of pathways counseling, setting minimum staffing ratios, or establishing benchmarks for student access and outcomes. Another approach would be to leverage existing funding streams, such as Title I or Title IV of ESSA, and attach requirements for pathways counseling to use those funds. This standardization would ensure that there are uniform levels of support and resources across the board, while still allowing for the necessary flexibility to cater to the unique needs of various regions and demographic groups. The federal government can foster a more equitable and effective national framework by establishing clear expectations, guidelines, and guardrails.

There are numerous benefits to funding such efforts beyond the standardization of pathways counseling. The funds themselves would help to close gaps. Formula funds for SEAs and LEAs would ensure that the benefits are felt across the nation, unlike specific grants, which often have a limited reach. That said, an initial grant program would still impact many students.



Pass Legislation for Universal Accessibility

Over time, **the federal government can create systems that require every high school to have a dedicated pathways counselor with the necessary tools and training, along with fully supported mental health support staff, or a plan to ensure that all the high schools within a state or LEA have the personnel in place by a target date.** This legislative effort would make college and career counseling a standard and integral part of the high school experience. By ensuring universal accessibility, the federal government can significantly boost students' preparedness for their future careers — through an extended educational path, career training, work-based learning, and more.

To truly achieve equity, resources must be accessible to all students. Intentional choices and built-in guardrails must ensure that historically underserved groups such as students with disabilities, those learning English, those experiencing homelessness, and those within the foster care system have the necessary supports, accommodations, and additional counseling. For example, legislation should guarantee that resources are translated into a student's home language.

Provide Federal Funding for Resource Development

Specific federal funds should be allocated to SEAs to develop standardized, yet customizable, tools and resources for schools. These could include accessible digital platforms, informational materials, and interactive career and college planning tools. In an ideal model, certain core elements would be standardized across all states and schools to ensure consistency and quality. For example, all resources should include accurate, up-to-date information on high school graduation requirements, postsecondary education options (including community colleges, four-year universities, and trade schools), financial aid opportunities, and regional labor market trends. However, the delivery methods and specific content of these resources should vary to accommodate local needs and contexts. States could tailor materials to highlight industries and careers that are particularly relevant to their economies or adapt resources to be culturally and linguistically responsive to their student populations.

SEAs should collaborate with other key state agencies and stakeholders to develop these resources. Labor and workforce development departments can provide valuable data on high-demand occupations, skills requirements, and projected job openings. Higher education agencies can offer insights on postsecondary programs, admissions processes, and articulation agreements. Engaging diverse partners, including employers, community organizations, and student and family representatives, can help ensure that resources are comprehensive, relevant, and user-friendly.

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Additional grants or funding should be made available to those who introduce or want to introduce innovative practices, which could range from new technological tools to unique partnership models that enhance support

In addition to resource development, some federal funds should be dedicated to communication and dissemination efforts. High-quality tools and materials are only impactful if they reach their intended audience. SEAs should have a clear plan and adequate funding to promote these resources through multiple channels, including via school counselor training, teacher professional development, direct outreach to students and families, and public awareness campaigns. By investing in communication, we can ensure that all stakeholders — particularly those in under-resourced schools and communities — are aware of and able to access these valuable college and career planning tools.

What the Department of Education Can Do

Incentivize Innovation and Best Practices

While new legislation is needed to set a uniform floor for all based on what is proven to work, supporting innovation is key to educational progress and meeting the diverse needs of students. **The federal government should incentivize states and local educational agencies (LEAs) to develop and implement creative solutions that effectively support students' navigation through programs, perhaps through the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grant program.** Additional grants or funding should be made available to those who introduce or want to introduce innovative practices, which could range from new technological tools to unique partnership models that enhance support, and which should be packaged within any new legislation in this space.

The federal government should also establish a platform for sharing best practices and successful models. This could be a community of practice led by the Department of Education (ED) through the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and with the support of nonprofit partners who act as the conveners, where states and districts can collaborate, learn from each other's successes and challenges, and collectively push forward the evolution of such counseling. Having such a platform would facilitate the dissemination of effective strategies and foster a collaborative environment for continuous improvement.

Create a Cross-Agency Task Force

The federal government could create a cross-agency task force for ongoing oversight of pathways programs led by the Departments of Education and Labor and with the participation of other agency leaders. This task force would be responsible for ensuring consistency in the quality and accessibility of these programs across states. By monitoring program implementation and outcomes of the new program, the task force could identify areas for improvement, share best practices, and recommend adjustments, as needed, to serve all students effectively. The task force should also include diverse voices, including K-12 educators, higher education leaders, industry partners, and students and families from under-represented groups.

Provide National Training and Certification for Pathways Counselors

Having a national certification program for pathways counselors would establish a high and consistent guidance standard nationwide. Congress and the federal government could award grants to states to create statewide certification programs or provide additional funding to integrate pathways counselor training into existing frameworks, like the [Serve America Act](#). Professional training and certification would ensure that counselors are well-equipped to provide the best possible support to students.

Through ED, ongoing training and technical assistance to state educational agencies (SEAs) can foster

high-quality, equitable pathways programs. When ESEA comes up for reauthorization, it would be prudent for Congress to make pathways counselors allowable recipients of professional development funding, so counselors can pursue continuous learning on educational trends, career opportunities, and techniques to support students better. ED can provide guidance on how Title II of ESSA funds can be used to support professional learning on pathways for counselors.²

Commission Long-Term Research and Data Analysis

To continuously refine and enhance the effectiveness of pathways counseling programs, it is imperative that the department commission longitudinal studies from IES that track the long-term outcomes of students who participate in these initiatives.³ By understanding the trajectory of students' careers and educational paths over extended periods, policymakers, educators, and advocates can gain invaluable insights into programs' strengths and areas for improvement. These studies will provide a robust data set that can be used to inform future policy decisions and ensure that programs and counseling are aligned with evolving workforce and higher education needs.

Share Data Via a Statewide Longitudinal Data System

The data should be made available through a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS), as it will be instrumental in guiding the strategic development of pathways counseling programs nationwide. By analyzing trends, outcomes, and the impact of various interventions, the federal government and state and local education agencies can make evidence-based adjustments to the programs. This ongoing cycle of research and data analysis is crucial for creating a dynamic and responsive education system that continually adapts to better serve students' needs and ensure that they have equitable access to college and career counseling services that prepare them for successful futures.

While the following considerations may not directly involve the provision of pathways counseling services, they play a critical role in fostering the sharing of best practices and ensuring that federal resources are used effectively and responsibly. By prioritizing these areas, the federal government can create a robust ecosystem that supports and enhances college and career counseling efforts nationwide. Investing in partnerships, research, and data systems not only maximizes the impact of taxpayer dollars but also ensures that pathways programs are continuously improving and adapting to meet evolving workforce and student needs. Moreover, by holding states and districts accountable for using federal funds and the outcomes achieved, policymakers can demonstrate a commitment to fiscal responsibility and evidence-based decision-making. Ultimately, these considerations strengthen the foundation upon which high-quality, equitable pathways counseling programs can be built and sustained over time.

Foster Partnerships Between K-12 Education, Higher Education, and Industry

Competitive grant programs should incentivize partnerships among LEAs, colleges, universities, and community organizations. Such collaborations can create seamless transitions for students from high school to postsecondary education or the workforce. By leveraging the expertise and resources of the education sector and industry, students can obtain real-world learning experiences, internships, and take early college courses that will better prepare them for their future careers. Moreover, such efforts can help ensure that pathways counselors deeply understand the needs and opportunities in their states and communities. Expanding Career-Connected High Schools funding focusing on counseling and navigation is one way to do this.

Monitor Pathways Programs and Hold Them Accountable

Creating a national framework for monitoring the effectiveness of pathways programs — preferably through one federal program rather than a combination of several funding streams — is crucial. Regular reporting and accountability measures should be established, setting national benchmarks and performance indicators for schools to meet. This approach will ensure that pathways programs deliver on their promise to support students effectively and equitably.

Accountability measures should be tied to funding distribution rather than used punitively. For example, if gaps were identified in one community, additional funding would be directed to that community, so an LEA could hire more pathways counselors and offer additional professional learning. The federal government must commit to use its findings to create accountability measures that direct federal resources and funding to states and LEAs with the greatest need for support.



Considerations for Creating an Equitable Federal Pathways System

The programs outlined above highlight the ways in which current policies could support effective pathways systems. However, dedicated attention to pathways navigation is needed to ensure equity, due to competing priorities that take time, attention, and funding away from counseling support.⁴ The proposed ideas and levers outlined in the table below would provide a comprehensive federal system when created and implemented together; however, approaching any of the potential levers would be a positive step toward progress.

| Idea | Lever |
|--|--|
| Enhanced federal support and oversight for pathways counseling through a new grant program | Formula program for SEAs and LEAs |
| Legislation for universal accessibility to pathways counselors | Legislative mandate |
| Federal funding for resource development | Targeted funds for SEAs |
| Incentivizing innovation and best practice | Expansion of the Education Innovation and Research grant program |
| Cross-agency task force for oversight | Monitoring and coordination |
| National training and certification for pathways counselors | Grant for state certification programs |
| Partnerships between K-12, higher ed, and industry | Expansion of Career-Connected High Schools grant program |
| Monitoring and accountability | National benchmarks tied to funding |
| Long-term research and data analysis | IES longitudinal studies |
| Data collection and sharing | Statewide longitudinal data systems |

Conclusion

The time is now to build an education-to-workforce ecosystem that leaves no one behind — an ecosystem that provides every student, regardless of background, with the support they need to identify their passions, develop their skills, and chart a course to a fulfilling career and life.

This is not just an educational or economic imperative but a moral one. As a nation, we have an obligation to ensure that every child has the chance to pursue their dreams and contribute their talents to society. Federal leadership is essential to fulfilling this promise. By working collaboratively across agencies, sectors, and political divides, we can muster the will and the resources to make high-quality, equity-focused college and career counseling a reality for all.

Together, we can transform pathways counseling from a privilege for some to a right for all. Together, we can build a brighter, more inclusive, and more prosperous tomorrow for every student and our nation. The choice is ours — and the stakes could not be higher.

Endnotes

1. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized within Title IX of ESSA, is designed to address the needs of children experiencing homelessness and includes a requirement that funds be used for college counseling.
2. Sec. 2103 (b)(3)(O) providing high-quality professional development for teachers, principals, or other school leaders on effective strategies to integrate rigorous academic content, career and technical education, and work-based learning (if appropriate), which may include providing common planning time, to help prepare students for postsecondary education and the workforce.
3. There are multiple levels to pathways and navigation, and federal policy can be a tool to advance different pathway options. Long-term research can be a tool to advance formal programs but may or may not be suitable for less intensive or formal forms of guidance.
4. Federal funding is limited and must be spread across several critical programs and services. The flexibility built into many of said programs is necessary to ensure that SEAs and LEAs can address the myriad needs students have.



ABOUT EDTRUST

EdTrust is committed to advancing policies and practices to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system. Through our research and advocacy, EdTrust improves equity in education from preschool through college, engages diverse communities dedicated to education equity and justice and increases political and public will to build an education system where students will thrive.



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ABOUT ALL4ED

All4Ed's mission works to advance equitable policies and practices so all students, especially those from underserved communities—particularly students of color and those from low-income families—graduate from high school prepared to complete postsecondary education and achieve success in a rapidly changing world.



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