

CURRICULUM &amp; INSTRUCTION

## Go beyond career-ready: Get career active

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore February 14, 2024



The landscape of public education is shifting. While academic rigor remains vital, a new emphasis on college and career readiness (CCR) is emerging.

Interest in CCR began with the 2012 passage of ESSA, which encouraged states to include a fifth indicator for student performance in state accountability systems. Thirty-three states included this indicator by 2018. And as we transitioned out of the pandemic, policymakers, concerned about learning loss, the economy and the cost of college, showed increased interest in CCR programming and options.

We offer that early career activation, reimagined through the lens of high-quality career pathways, can play a crucial role in equipping students with the skills and credentials they need to thrive in the modern workforce now, not in the distant future.

Traditionally, public education has prioritized academic knowledge, preparing students for college entrance exams and general intellectual development. However, the current economic reality demands more. The rapid evolution of the job market requires graduates to possess not just knowledge but also skills, such as CASEL's workforce competencies, industry-specific competencies, or America Succeeds' cross-sector durable skills.

Recognizing this, CCR initiatives are pushing educators beyond textbooks and toward creation of robust career pathways supported by career activation, occasionally as early as middle school.



This approach is grounded in the three 'ships': mentorship, internship, and apprenticeship.

Mentorships are the early offering for middle-years youth who are looking for guidance on career intention setting. Internships are practical work experiences for older youth that provide meaningful opportunities to experience the world of work, while not providing skill-building for a specific job.

For the emerging workforce graduating high school, apprenticeships offer job-embedded certifications focusing on both short- and long-term credentialing. This emphasis on career preparation manifests in the exponential growth of career credentialing.

Programs such as career and technical education (CTE) are seeing massive enrollment, catering to over 7.5 million secondary and 3.5 million postsecondary students. States are actively investing in this shift, with 47 states aiming to ensure 90% of their youth participate in education, training or employment programs.

## How to take the “learn-and-earn” approach

But simply offering career-themed classes isn't enough. True CCR demands high-quality pathways that provide students with dual enrollment credits and industry-relevant credentials. These pathways don't follow rigid career ladders; they are dynamic lattices that allow students to explore, gain experience, and build stackable credentials along the way.

Imagine a high school student enrolled in a STEM-focused technical program, earning credit for both coursework and experiential work-based learning opportunities alongside a local tech company. This “learn-and-earn” approach combines theoretical knowledge with real-world application, preparing students for immediate workforce entry while laying the foundation for further education and career advancement.

To ensure these pathways function effectively, state-level incentives are crucial. States such as Minnesota are demonstrating leadership by providing tuition relief to make higher education more accessible and reduce student debt. Others, such as Delaware and Ohio, are investing in program development and capacity building, ensuring a diverse range of short-term credential programs that cater to local needs.

Some states, such as Texas, are even incorporating short-term credentials into their funding formulas, offering tangible financial support to these programs. Most recently, Indiana is offering career scholarship accounts with dedicated specific state-supported funding, similar to individualized training accounts (ITAs), typically reserved for adult learners only.

## We need a strategic reset

Building partnerships with employers is equally critical. The [American Student Assistance report](#) highlighting the lack of quality work-based learning policies in most states underscores this need. District leaders and policymakers must engage actively with employers, demonstrating the mutual benefits of CCR.

Students gain essential skills and work experience, while employers receive access to a trained and job-ready workforce. Collaborative efforts, leveraging the US Chamber of Commerce's framework, can further bolster these partnerships, offering access to national



and local networks that provide students with valuable experiences and stackable credits for both graduation and higher education.

The current state of CCR implementation across districts shows some disparity. While certain states and districts possess well-developed CCR/CTE policies, others are lagging behind. This calls for a strategic reset of partnerships at the district level.

By reimagining a total career-focused with localized high-quality pathways, offering valuable learn and earn options for students and families, career activation can become a driving force in closing the gap between education and workforce preparedness.

The path forward for CCR is clear: Invest in high-quality pathways, maximize state-level incentives, build bridges with employers, and leverage effective partnerships. By embracing these strategies and rethinking career activation through the lens of career readiness, public education can empower students to not just earn diplomas, but also build fulfilling careers and become lifelong learners in a rapidly changing world.

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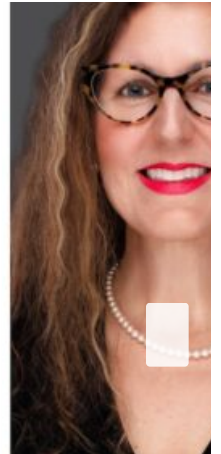
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