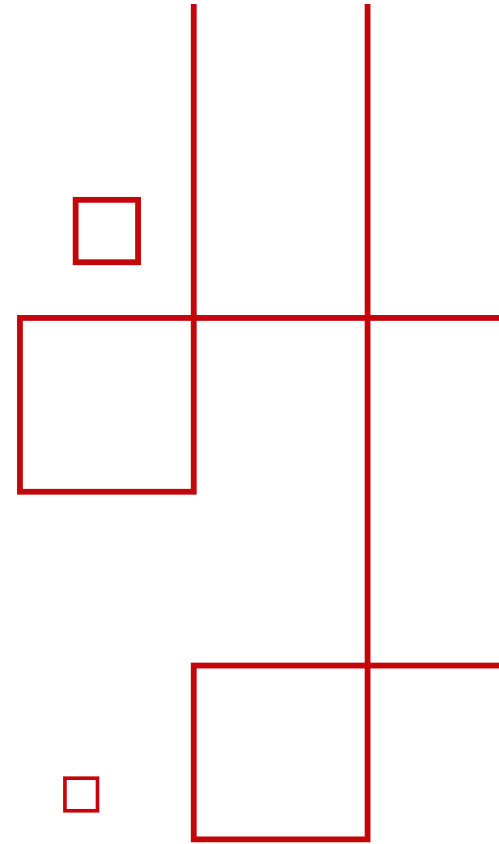




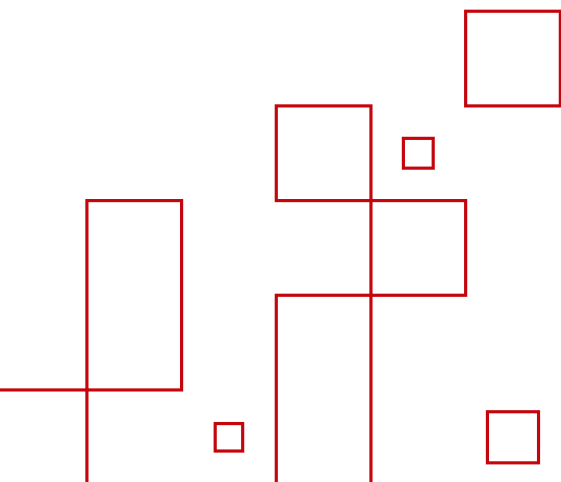
School for Workers
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

September 2025



Career Pathways: Feedback from Wisconsin Educators

For the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



Acknowledgements

This research and report were supported by funding provided by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the dedicated school staff whose participation during summer break and candid discussions about their experiences were invaluable to this project.

Thanks are owed to Beth Kaminski and Karin Smith for their support and guidance.

Special thanks to Angela Catherine for her design work on the project materials and preparation of this final report.

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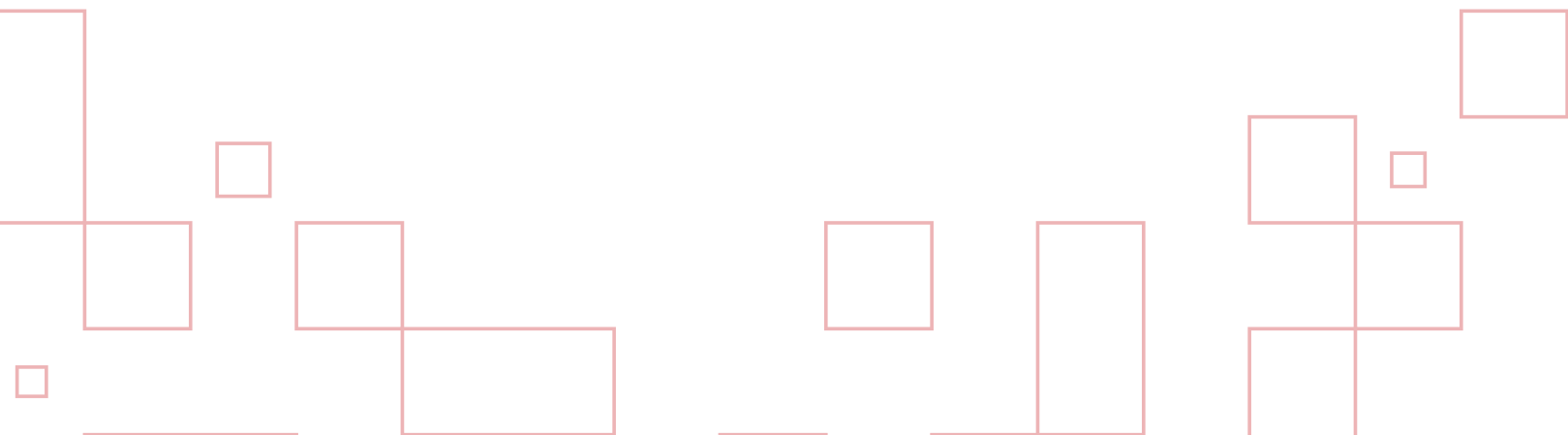


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Executive summary

This report synthesizes feedback from four focus groups representing 22 school districts conducted in July 2025 by UW-Madison and DPI, aimed at understanding how schools perceive Career Pathways and support students through these programs. Participant districts were selected from both the top and bottom performance indicators, and included superintendents, principals, counselors, and Career and Technical Education (CTE) teachers from across Wisconsin.

A recurring theme was the significant challenge posed by limited staffing and financial resources, especially in smaller districts, which caused staff to "wear many hats" and be stretched thin.

Key strengths identified included strong partnerships with technical colleges for dual enrollment and work-based learning, as well as the use of tools like Xello for academic and career planning (ACP). However, a major barrier is the perception of disjointed state-level initiatives and requirements, which causes confusion and inefficiency for districts.

Participants expressed a desire for increased, flexible funding and more consistent, targeted support from state or regional levels, such as shared personnel or dedicated mentors, to help streamline programs, reduce administrative burdens, and invest in needed equipment and teacher training. There was also a strong feeling that career readiness efforts should be more integrated across all academic departments, rather than solely within CTE.

Many of the themes emerging from this work were consistent with those from recent national surveys and the April 2025 Career-Connected High Schools Implementation Report. Lessons for Wisconsin are highlighted in the national perspective, and possible actions for DPI and State-Level Policymakers are detailed in the conclusion.

Analysis of focus group responses

This review that follows mirrors the structure of the "DPI Career Pathways script," which is included at the end, emphasizing the insights and experiences shared by participating school and district staff.

A recurring theme was the significant challenge posed by limited staffing and financial resources, especially in smaller districts, which caused staff to "wear many hats" and be stretched thin.

Welcome and introduction

Focus group participants represented a diverse range of roles, including principals of 7-12 schools, superintendents, high school principals, school counselors, business teachers, CTE coordinators, special education teachers, family and consumer sciences teachers, and finance managers.

When asked to describe their feelings about career readiness work in their school or district using one word, common responses included:



- Necessary
- Exciting
- Improving
- Work in progress / Building
- Exploration
- Solid position
- Optimistic
- Focused / Priority
- Expanding
- Partnerships
- Developing
- Sisyphian system

These initial responses reveal a general enthusiasm for career readiness, balanced by acknowledgment of ongoing challenges and the need for continued growth.

Defining Career Pathways

Participants were reminded and generally understood what defines a K-12 Career Pathway Program in Wisconsin. They recognized that it must include at least two CTE courses and at least two of the four additional components: Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs), work-based learning (WBL), college credit opportunities (Dual Enrollment), and industry-recognized credentials (IRCs). They also understood that these programs should align with labor market needs and support students in transitioning to postsecondary education or employment.

A clear distinction was made between Career Pathway Programs and Academic and Career Plans (ACPs). Career Pathway Programs are available to all students and are listed in the school district's course selection guide, while ACPs are personalized plans that reflect a student's interests, goals, and plans. Participants noted that a student's customized ACP can often lead them to a career pathway program. Interestingly, despite this explicit delineation, many participants discussed ACPs, particularly in smaller districts, where their goal was to create one for every student.

Strategies for supporting Career Pathway Programs

Using career planning tools: Many districts heavily rely on Xello to assess student interests, guide them through exploring career clusters, and develop their ACPs. At the same time, some questioned the validity of the responses, claiming students were not taking these seriously and there was a lack of accountability to do so.

Dedicated ACP time: Some schools schedule specific times daily or weekly for students to work on their ACPs, often with an advisor.

Teacher teams and committees: CTE teachers and counselors often work together to review course options, identify student interests, and plan for expanding pathways.

Community engagement: Strategies include career fairs, tours of local businesses, and inviting guest speakers to introduce students to different careers.

Partnerships with technical colleges: Building strong relationships with colleges such as CVTC, Nicolet, Southwest Tech, Northwood Tech, and Western Technical College is essential for program development and offering early college opportunities.

Course selection guides: Some districts list career clusters and dual credit options in their course catalogs. Others indicate that their guides are not explicitly aligned with career pathways, some relying on visual displays or individual counseling to help students understand their options.

Integration and coordination

- Many small districts reported that career readiness responsibilities are spread across multiple staff members who "wear many hats" (e.g., counselors, CTE teachers, administrators) instead of having a dedicated career readiness or ACP coordinator.
- Collaboration across departments is a goal, with efforts to involve general education teachers through interdisciplinary projects and blended learning. However, much of the work often stays within the CTE department.
- Feedback from community and industry partners is gathered through advisory teams, annual summits, monthly meetings with alliances (e.g., Stateline Manufacturing Alliance), senior interviews, and direct communication with employers. Some participants mentioned relying heavily on data and input from technical colleges, as local employers might be limited.

Many small districts reported that career readiness responsibilities are spread across multiple staff members who "wear many hats" (e.g., counselors, CTE teachers, administrators) instead of having a dedicated career readiness or ACP coordinator.

Work-Based Learning (WBL)

WBL provides students with real-world experiences, defined by six criteria including sustained interactions (at least 90 hours), real or simulated worksites, meaningful engagement, alignment with coursework, training agreements, and evaluation/supervision. Eight different types of WBL programs exist, such as internships, youth apprenticeships, and DPI Employability Skills. Career-based learning experiences (CBLEs) like job shadows and career fairs are valuable, but are not reported as WBL.

Types of WBL offered

- Youth Apprenticeship (YA) is by far the most prevalent WBL program reported across districts.
- Other types mentioned include internships (e.g., ROC internship program), School-based Enterprise (e.g., Cardinal Manufacturing), and Employability Skills Co-op.
- Some schools noted a transition from "school-to-work" programs to more structured YA programs with greater accountability.

Connecting with employers for WBL

Direct outreach: School staff such as counselors, CTE teachers, and YA coordinators directly connect with local businesses.

Community events: Business breakfasts or community gatherings are used to connect with employers and showcase school programs.

CESA support: Regional CESAs (e.g., CESA 3, CESA 4, CESA 8) play a significant role in coordinating YA programs, facilitating interviews, and building employer networks.

Technical colleges: Collaborate with schools to provide internships and training programs that create WBL opportunities.

Student-led initiatives: Students sometimes reach out to employers, and schools support this effort.

Parent/community network: Informal connections through parents or community members can lead to WBL opportunities.

Needs for targeted supports in WBL

- Some districts expressed satisfaction with current support, especially if they have a dedicated, effective WBL coordinator.
- Others indicated a need for additional state-level support to engage more partners, particularly for smaller communities with limited local businesses or specific industries (e.g., early childhood education).
- Suggestions included assistance with the "marketing piece" to inform students and parents about opportunities and more established networks for high-needs learners or in specialized fields.
- The overall sentiment was that any additional support would be helpful, as staff are already "wearing multiple hats".

Dual Enrollment (DE)

Dual Enrollment allows high school students to earn college credits, which accelerates their learning and reduces college costs. It also helps students deepen their understanding of a specific career field and makes their transition to college or work smoother.

Connecting with higher education partners

Technical Colleges (TCs) are primary partners for dual enrollment and transcribed credit opportunities (e.g., Chippewa Valley Technical College, Nicolet College, Northwood Tech, Southwest Tech, Western Technical College, Blackhawk Technical College). TCs often have dedicated K-12 teams or liaisons who actively reach out to schools, deliver presentations, set up meetings with individual students, and assist with enrollment paperwork. They also run academies (half-day or full-day programs on college campuses) for career-focused course series. Many schools have agreements allowing high school teachers to teach TC courses for college credit.

Universities (UW System) are less frequently involved as active partners, with some schools reporting challenges in establishing dual credit programs due to strict teacher qualification standards (e.g., master's degree in the content area). Some schools have limited online options or are just starting partnerships with UW campuses.

CESA involvement promotes connections and organize meetings between schools and TCs.

School staff leading the way with school counselors, CTE teachers, and administrators are often the ones to initiate and oversee these partnerships.

Meeting needs

Many participants believe that technical college partnerships effectively meet their needs due to their accessibility, comprehensive offerings, and willingness to collaborate closely with high schools.

The main obstacle with dual enrollment, especially at universities, is the requirement that high school teachers hold specific master's degrees in the content area to teach college-level courses. Many experienced teachers or those having a general education master's degree do not meet this requirement. This limits in-house courses, forcing students to enroll online or travel.

Some expressed **interest in more opportunities with four-year colleges** but acknowledged the current challenges.

Funding remains a concern, as schools often pay substantial fees for students to take college courses, particularly with technical colleges, without always receiving state funds for these credits.

Industry-Recognized Credentials (IRCs)

IRCs validate students' skills and knowledge for specific industries, leading to high-demand jobs or advanced training.

IRCs offered and connecting with partners

- Schools partner with technical colleges for many IRCs, often through academies or specific coursework.
- Local businesses and nursing homes sometimes fund or facilitate CNA training for students.
- Non-profit organizations can help fund and coordinate IRC opportunities for students, managing applications and logistics.

CTE teachers play a key role in identifying and integrating IRCs into their curriculum, although this can be time-consuming. Some districts directly link IRC achievement to CTE incentive grants, mainly viewing them as a funding source.

Common IRCs include Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), welding credentials, and NIMS (National Institute for Metalworking Skills) credentials.

Other examples are saw blade credentials (Woodworking Career Alliance), OSHA 10, retail IRCs (National Retail Federation), and AutoCAD certification.

Value and challenges of IRCs

- Participants expressed **diverse opinions on the value of IRCs** beyond funding. Some, like the CNA, are seen as immediately beneficial for employment. Others questioned their direct value in smaller, rural areas, suggesting they might be "extra steps" that don't hold much local significance.
- **Funding remains a major obstacle** for purchasing essential equipment, such as quality automotive tools, and covering initial setup costs for IRC programs.
- **Teacher time and expertise are additional challenges**, especially in small districts with "one-person departments".
- It was noted that **learners with low literacy levels struggle** to pass some IRC exams, creating a barrier.
- There is a **desire for targeted state support** to help staff understand and implement IRCs, along with funding to acquire quality tools.

Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs)

CTSOs like DECA, FBLA, FFA, HOSA, and SkillsUSA provide practical experiences, leadership opportunities, hands-on projects, and industry-related competitions. These activities strengthen classroom learning and help build technical and employability skills.

Decision-making and offerings

The main factor in deciding whether to offer a CTSO is a teacher's willingness and enthusiasm to advise it. Student interest also plays a role, as teachers look for opportunities that match students' interests.

Commonly offered CTSOs include:

- ✓ FFA (Future Farmers of America): Very strong in many rural districts and often has robust alumni support.
- ✓ FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America): Offered in many schools, with new programs establishing it.
- ✓ SkillsUSA: Available in some schools, with ongoing efforts to introduce it elsewhere.
- ✓ FCCLA (Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America): Present in a few districts.
- ✓ DECA: Mentioned by one district.
- ✓ HOSA: Desired by some districts but difficult to staff.

Challenges in offering or expanding CTSOs:

Teacher time and workload: This is the biggest obstacle, as teachers are already managing many responsibilities, and supervising a CTSO adds a significant extra burden, often outside regular hours and with little pay.

Finding willing staff or advisers: Recruiting and retaining advisors is challenging, especially for specialized CTSOs.

Student availability: In small schools, the same group of students often participates in multiple extracurricular activities like sports and clubs, leading to conflicts and dividing students among various organizations.

Funding: Costs for travel, uniforms, and competitions can be burdensome for students and often require fundraising.

Lack of dedicated support: There is a desire for mentor programs for new advisors and increased collaboration among CTSOs at the state level.

Addressing barriers

When asked about the biggest challenges to providing career pathway programs, participants consistently pointed out:

Funding: Insufficient flexible funding for staffing, equipment, program development, and student participation costs.

Staffing: Difficulties in affording or recruiting additional staff, especially in departments with only one person.

Time: Staff are overwhelmed with multiple responsibilities, making it hard to dedicate adequate time to planning, implementing, and coordinating career pathways.

Rural and geographical challenges: Lack of local employers, long travel distances to colleges and businesses, and specific issues with high-needs and transient student populations.

Consistency and clarity: Changes in CTE policies and terminology at the state level create confusion and make it hard for staff to stay

Teacher time and workload is the biggest obstacle, as teachers are already managing many responsibilities, and supervising a CTSO adds a significant extra burden, often outside regular hours and with little pay.

informed and effectively implement programs (e.g., different naming conventions for clusters and pathways).

"Checklist" mentality: Career pathways are often viewed as just another state requirement (e.g., for Perkins funding) rather than a fully integrated and valuable program, which can reduce genuine buy-in from staff and students.

Teacher qualifications: Strict requirements for teaching dual enrollment courses, such as holding a master's degree in the content area, restrict the growth of these programs.

How additional funding could help

- ✓ **Offset salary expenses and hire dedicated staff:** Allow districts to hire a specific CTE or career readiness coordinator or provide stipends for current staff who handle multiple roles.
- ✓ **Invest in equipment and programs:** Buy quality tools for IRCs and broaden program choices.
- ✓ **Support student participation:** Pay for CTSO fees, uniforms, and travel to competitions.
- ✓ **Teacher training and credentials:** Support master's degrees or specialized training for teachers to qualify for dual credit or IRC proctoring.
- ✓ **Flexible use:** Enable schools to allocate funds where they are most needed without strict content restrictions.

Reimagining Career Pathways

Participants offered multiple suggestions on how the state could improve support for career pathway development:

Direct, flexible funding

Provide substantial "lump sum" grants to districts for career pathways initiatives, allowing them to address specific local needs such as staffing, equipment, student expenses, and teacher training without overly restrictive rules.

There was a strong preference for non-competitive grants, as competitive grants often consume staff time without guaranteeing funding outcomes.

Regional shared personnel/support

Establish a system where a dedicated career pathways specialist or coordinator is shared among small rural districts (e.g., 2-4 districts) to offer localized support, build partnerships, and maintain consistency. This person could serve as a coach or mentor to staff.

Improved clarity and cohesion of information

Increase the clarity and consistency of state-level CTE information, terminology, and requirements to reduce confusion among staff and students (e.g., aligning career clusters, pathways, and youth apprenticeship categories).

Broader collaboration across departments

Develop strategies or mandates to actively involve core academic teachers in career readiness, transforming it into a school-wide effort rather than just a CTE task. This could include professional development or clear guidelines on connecting core subjects to careers.

Rethink the "fourth year" of high school

Encourage or incentivize students to spend their senior year (or part of it) engaged in post-secondary college coursework or substantial work-based learning, reducing college debt and expediting workforce entry. This would require state support for early college programs, especially at technical colleges.

Simplify teacher credentialing for dual enrollment

Make obtaining necessary qualifications easier for high school teachers (e.g., master's in content area) to teach dual enrollment courses. Consider offering free courses to help staff expand their credentials.

Promote diversity in career messaging

Ensure students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, see role models from diverse backgrounds discussing trade and career opportunities.

Emphasize foundational skills

Highlight the importance of strong academic skills (math, science, literacy, communication) for success in technical careers and ensure funding supports this comprehensive approach, not just specific pathway elements.

Career-Connected High Schools Implementation Report

The Career-Connected High Schools Implementation Report, prepared in April 2025 for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction by the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative, was also reviewed. This report summarizes feedback from 17 pilot high schools across the state that received capacity-building resources to utilize existing state programs, resources, and partnerships related to Academic and Career Planning and Regional Career Pathways.

Both the CCHS Implementation Report and this current DPI report compile feedback from focus groups, emphasizing a **shared enthusiasm for career readiness initiatives alongside notable challenges** in their practical implementation within Wisconsin schools. A key similarity highlighted by both reports is the strong partnerships with technical colleges, which are often viewed as crucial partners for dual enrollment and work-based learning opportunities. Both studies also identify a common barrier in teacher qualification requirements for dual enrollment courses. Specifically, the requirement for high school teachers to hold a master's degree in

the specific content area is a recurring obstacle, limiting schools' ability to offer more in-house dual credit options and often increasing reliance on technical colleges.

Additionally, both current and past research **emphasize the need for clearer, more unified state-level guidance and resources**, showing that existing initiatives can seem scattered or confusing for districts. This report specifically highlights limited staffing and flexible financial resources as the primary and ongoing challenge. It consistently notes that staff, especially in smaller districts, are "wearing many hats" and are "stretched thin," which directly hampers the planning, execution, and coordination of career pathways.

Interestingly, both reports include **specific and critical feedback on the usability and perceived value of specific state-provided tools**, such as DPI Career Pathways Maps. Participants in the CCHS focus groups described the DPI template as "clunky," "too complex," and "not deemed helpful" for teachers. Many schools created "cheat sheets" or district-specific "programs of study" as alternatives, finding that the official maps are not widely used by teachers or students, and definitely not yet "drifted down to families." Feedback received for this report also explicitly mentions a "checklist mentality" regarding Career Pathways, implying they are sometimes viewed merely as a state requirement for funding rather than a fully integrated and valuable program.

Although CCHS research participants were part of a well-resourced pilot, that report also **underscores the need for "Additional Support,"** including clearer budget guidance and a "one-stop shop" for resources. The current study identified resource and personnel shortages as critical issues and urges increased, flexible funding, along with more consistent and targeted support from state or regional levels, such as shared personnel or dedicated mentors (a component of the pilot), to reduce administrative burdens and invest in vital areas, including equipment and teacher training. This focus is understandable given the differences in the support levels provided to participants in the two studies.

The national perspective

Recent surveys from The Walton Family Foundation/Gallup and Schultz Family Foundation (SFF) examined Gen Z's limited awareness of non-college pathways and transitions from high school to the job market.

A key similarity highlighted by both reports is the strong partnerships with technical colleges, which are often viewed as crucial partners for dual enrollment and work-based learning opportunities. Both studies also identify a common barrier in teacher qualification requirements for dual enrollment courses.

They provide a nationwide view of student preparedness and workforce readiness, highlighting systemic gaps and offering insights for better supporting young people's transition from school to work. Below are key insights, expanding upon the points identified in this Department of Public Instruction (DPI) report regarding Career Pathways programs and integrating findings from all three sources.

Addressing the "Broken Marketplace" through coordinated support

The SFF study identifies a "Broken Marketplace" where young adults face fractured pathways from school to work, feeling stalled and unsupported by misaligned systems, and parents, navigators, and employers that often have misaligned expectations and provide outdated guidance. High schools frequently do not expose students to a range of careers and non-college training pathways. These issues resonate with Wisconsin's challenge, identified in this DPI report, of limited staffing and financial resources, leading to staff "wearing many hats" and feeling "stretched thin". This DPI study also noted the "disjointed nature of state-level initiatives and requirements," creating confusion and inefficiency for districts.

Lesson for Wisconsin

The state could prioritize implementing increased, flexible funding and more consistent, targeted support at the state and regional levels. For example, establishing uniform terminology across programs and offering experienced shared personnel or dedicated mentors could help reduce the workload on "stretched-thin" staff, allowing them to be more proactive in guiding students. It could also improve much-needed collaboration that is currently missing between schools, families, and employers, as highlighted by SFF. Career readiness efforts should also be more integrated across all academic departments, rather than being confined solely to CTE, as desired by DPI focus group participants.

Enhancing career readiness guidance and parental engagement

The Gallup study shows that students rate their schools with an average grade of B- for teaching relevant skills and helping them explore careers. Less than half of parents regularly discuss postgraduation plans with their children, often focusing only on bachelor's degrees and paid jobs. Parents' limited knowledge directly affects students' understanding of career pathways. The SFF study also points out that parents often rely on their own outdated life experiences when giving advice and may overestimate their child's readiness or the ease of transitioning into the workforce.

Lesson for Wisconsin

It is essential to enhance parents', teachers', and counselors' knowledge of and ability to discuss a wide range of post-secondary options, including alternatives to college. This involves providing resources and tools for parents and schools to hold regular, informed conversations with students about all available paths and the careers they can lead to. Schools should also actively introduce diverse career information through community involvement (career fairs, guest speakers, business tours) rather than relying solely on existing networks.

Re-evaluating the value of degrees versus skills and supporting alternative paths

The SFF study shows increasing skepticism among young adults and parents about the return on investment in a four-year college degree, with only 51% believing it is worth the cost. At the same time, there is broad agreement that skills are more important than credentials. Despite this, employers continue to rely heavily on degrees. The Gallup study shows that students have limited knowledge and feel unprepared for non-college paths, such as apprenticeships and certifications. This directly relates to Wisconsin's challenge with teacher qualifications for dual enrollment, where strict master's degree requirements restrict in-house college-level courses.

Lesson for Wisconsin

The state should increase support for the process of helping high school teachers obtain the necessary qualifications to teach dual enrollment courses, possibly by offering "free courses" or funding for advanced degrees. This would expand accessible college credit opportunities and align with the broader recognition of diverse pathways and skill-based learning. It also encourages a "rethinking of the 'fourth year' of high school" to include strong post-secondary or work-based learning experiences.

Bridging the employer-school disconnect in work-based learning

The SFF study highlights an "Employment Catch-22," where employers demand experience for entry-level roles (77% require 1+ years) but few offer opportunities like internships (38%) or job shadowing (14%). Employers also often do not see themselves as primarily responsible for training young hires. Furthermore, 86% of navigators report not collaborating with potential employers. This DPI study notes that Youth Apprenticeship (YA) is the most common Work-Based Learning (WBL) program in Wisconsin, but emphasizes the need for more state-level support to involve additional WBL partners, especially in smaller communities with fewer local businesses.

The Gallup study shows that students have limited knowledge and feel unprepared for non-college paths, such as apprenticeships and certifications.

Lesson for Wisconsin

There is a strong need for targeted state support to help schools connect with more employers for WBL opportunities, including assistance with "marketing pieces" to inform students and parents about these options. Encouraging employers to invest in accessible entry points and skill-building opportunities for young people is essential, as 64% of young adults are seeking hands-on experiences to explore career options.

Leveraging modern guidance tools and prioritizing student well-being

The SFF study shows that young adults are increasingly turning to social media (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram) for self-discovery and career advice, viewing it as more influential than many traditional sources like guidance counselors or job fairs. However, parents and navigators largely overlook these tools. Importantly, the SFF study emphasizes that mental health is a top priority for young adults, often more than career and education goals, and many are still dealing with the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Navigators see significant mental health challenges but feel unprepared to handle them.

Lesson for Wisconsin

Schools should explore how to better integrate and utilize social media and AI as supplementary tools for career exploration, while providing staff with professional development to understand and employ these platforms effectively. Wisconsin could incorporate mental health support into career readiness efforts, as student well-being is essential for engaging in future planning and achieving goals.

Adopting a personalized approach to student support

The SFF study identifies five distinct segments of young adults, each facing different barriers and requiring different kinds of support, emphasizing that a "one-size-fits-all" approach simply does not work." This DPI study notes that Academic and Career Plans (ACPs) are personalized, individual roadmaps.

Lesson for Wisconsin

Career Pathway programs and ACPs should become more closely connected. While ACPs offer personalized support based on students' diverse needs, circumstances, and mindsets, integrating them within broader Career Pathways opens up more opportunities for student exploration and a better understanding of more expansive options. This involves moving beyond focused guidance to address the career exploration challenges faced by different groups of young adults, making support more relevant and effective for each student.

Conclusion

While Wisconsin has established a framework for Career Pathways, its success, particularly in small and rural districts, is inhibited by widespread issues such as staffing shortages, inadequate and inflexible funding, and challenges related to geographic isolation. Schools and educators are working hard, often taking on multiple roles, to offer ACPs and opportunities such as youth apprenticeships, dual enrollment with technical colleges, and industry-recognized credentials. To ensure equitable access and sustainable implementation, the following actions are worthy of consideration.

Possible actions for DPI and state-level policymakers:

- ✓ **Provide flexible funding:** Offer non-competitive, lump-sum grants for staffing, equipment, and student participation costs.
- ✓ **Create regional support systems:** Assign shared career pathway coordinators or mentors across small districts to streamline implementation.
- ✓ **Simplify and align guidance:** Standardize terminology and requirements for CTE, ACP, and Youth Apprenticeship programs.
- ✓ **Expand teacher credentialing support:** Fund or provide free coursework for teachers to meet dual enrollment qualifications.
- ✓ **Promote cross-department integration:** Develop strategies and professional development to involve core academic teachers in career readiness.
- ✓ **Enhance employer engagement:** Offer state-level assistance in marketing WBL opportunities and building employer networks.
- ✓ **Support CTSOs and student access:** Provide stipends for advisors and cover costs for student participation in CTSOs.
- ✓ **Leverage technology and social media:** Use modern platforms for career exploration and provide training for educators to integrate these tools.
- ✓ **Incorporate mental health supports:** Embed well-being resources into career readiness initiatives to address student needs holistically.

For Career Pathways to thrive and meet the varied needs of all students, stakeholders are advocating for more direct, substantial, and flexible state financial support, along with regionally assigned personnel to simplify processes and provide targeted expertise. This strategy would promote consistent and meaningful engagement across all aspects of career readiness, ease the workload on local staff, and support more comprehensive and lasting programs that benefit all students, regardless of their district's size or location.

Focus group script: Exploring Career Pathways in schools

0:00–5:00 | Welcome and introduction

Facilitator script:

"Welcome, everyone! Thank you for joining today's focus group on career pathways. Our goal is to learn more about how your school supports students in preparing for their futures through career pathways, work-based learning, dual enrollment, and more. Your insights could help shape future supports at the state, regional, and district levels. The session today will be recorded and transcribed to aid in preparing a final report for DPI."

Icebreaker question:

"Let's go around and share your name, your district, your role, and one word that describes how you feel about career readiness work in your school/district."

5:00–10:00 | Defining Career Pathways

Facilitator script:

"Let's start by defining what a K-12 Career Pathway Program is. In Wisconsin, a career pathway program at the high school level must include a series of at least two CTE courses and at least two of the following: Career and Technical Student Organizations, work-based learning, college credit opportunities, and industry-recognized credentials that help students prepare for a specific career field. Career Pathway programs should be aligned with labor market needs and include opportunities for students to earn credentials, gain experience, and transition into postsecondary education or employment."

"This is different from a student's Academic and Career Plan (ACP), which is more personalized. The ACP is a student's individual roadmap that includes their interests, goals, and plans for high school and beyond." Oftentimes, a student's individualized ACP can lead them to a career pathway program. Career Pathway programs are universally offered to all students in a district and should be published in your school district's course selection guide.

Example story:

"Let's take Nate, for example. Nate is interested in healthcare. His ACP includes taking biology and health science classes, joining HOSA (a CTSO), job shadowing at a local clinic, and earning a CNA certification. His school's Health Science Career Pathway supports this plan by offering relevant courses, which include embedded industry-recognized credentials, dual credit options, an aligned CTSO, and work-based learning opportunities."

10:00–20:00 | Career Pathway Strategies

Discussion prompt:

"What strategies does your school use to support career pathway programs?"

Follow-up prompts (if needed):

- Is your course selection guide aligned with your career pathway programs?
- Do you have a Career Readiness (or ACP) Coordinator?
- Is career readiness part of your strategic plan?
- Do educators collaborate across departments to help prepare students for careers?
- How is career readiness data used?
- How do teachers connect content to careers?
- Do you gather feedback from the community or industry partners?
- Do students engage with employers through ACP activities?

20:00–30:00 | Work-Based Learning (WBL)

Facilitator script:

“Work-Based Learning (WBL) gives students real-world experiences with employers. High-quality WBL includes six criteria: sustained interactions (at least 90 hours), real or simulated worksites, meaningful and firsthand engagement, alignment with coursework, training agreements, and evaluation and supervision. There are eight types of WBL programs, such as Entrepreneurial Student Business, Internship, School-based Enterprise, Simulated Worksite, Supervised Agricultural Experience, State Co-op Education Skills: Occupational, State Co-op Education Skills: DPI Employability Skills, and Youth Apprenticeship. WBL is a vital part of career pathways because it helps students make informed career decisions and build relationships with employers. Experiences such as job shadows and career fairs, while valuable, are not reported as WBL in Wisconsin. These earlier experiences, referred to as Career-based Learning Experiences (CBLES), are a pipeline to your school district’s WBL programs.

Discussion prompts:

- How does your school connect with employers to increase WBL opportunities for all students?
- Who helps you build these partnerships?
- Are your current partnerships meeting your needs? Why or why not?
- What would happen if your school had targeted supports to engage more partners?
- What could or should those supports look like?

30:00–40:00 | Dual Enrollment (DE)

Facilitator script:

“Dual Enrollment allows students to earn college credit while still in high school. It’s a powerful way to accelerate learning and reduce college costs. When aligned with career pathways, dual enrollment opportunities help students get a head start on postsecondary education, reduce the time and cost to earn a degree or credential, and deepen their knowledge in a specific career area. It supports a smoother transition from high school to college and career.”

Discussion prompts:

- How does your school connect with higher education partners to increase DE opportunities for all students?
- Who helps you with this work?
- Are your current partnerships meeting your needs? Why or why not?
- What would happen if your school had targeted supports to expand DE?
- What could or should those supports look like?

40:00–45:00 | Industry-Recognized Credentials (IRCs)

Facilitator script:

“Industry-Recognized Credentials (IRCs) are a key component of career pathways because they validate that students have the skills and knowledge needed in a specific industry. Earning an IRC shows employers that a student is prepared for in-demand jobs and can often lead directly to employment or advanced training. When embedded in career pathways, IRCs help students make progress toward meaningful careers while still in high school.

Discussion prompts:

- How does your school connect with partners to increase IRC opportunities for all students?
- Who helps you with this work?
- Are your current partnerships meeting your needs? Why or why not?
- What would happen if your school had targeted supports to expand IRCs?
- What could or should those supports look like?

50:00–55:00 | Addressing barriers

Discussion Prompts:

- What are the most significant barriers your school faces in offering career pathway programs?
- How could additional funding help overcome these barriers?

55:00–60:00 | Reimagining Career Pathways

Final prompt:

“If you could reimagine how the state supports career pathway implementation, what would you change or improve?”

Wrap-up:

“Thank you all for your time and insights today. Your feedback is incredibly valuable and could help shape future supports for schools across the state.”



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