

# Alignment Policy TOOLKIT

PART OF NSC'S SKILLS EQUITY AGENDA



STACKABLE  
CREDENTIALS



SKILLS-BASED  
SNAP E&T



INTEGRATED EDUCATION  
AND TRAINING



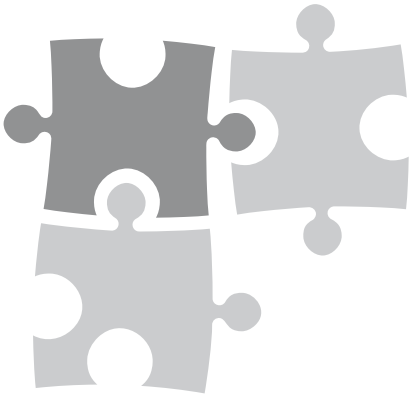
JOB-DRIVEN  
FINANCIAL AID



TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE  
FOR NEEDY FAMILIES



An **alignment policy** combines the key elements of integrated education and training; career counseling; support services; a high school diploma; training that leads to an industry-recognized, stackable credential; and industry engagement to create a pathway for low-income, low-skilled adults to earn postsecondary credentials that have value in the labor market.



# Alignment Policy Toolkit

## SECTION I. PURPOSE OF TOOLKIT

This toolkit addresses state policies that align central elements that enable low-income, low-skilled adults to follow pathways toward skilled careers in an industry sector or group of occupations.

National Skills Coalition (NSC) is promoting a set of “skills equity policies” aimed at expanding equitable access to middle-skill training, credentials, and family supporting careers, particularly for those who have faced barriers to economic opportunity. Each of the policies in our skills equity agenda is intended to address a specific challenge that low-income, low-skilled people commonly face when they try to access and complete middle-skill training programs<sup>1</sup>. The policies are:

- **Integrated education and training policies;**
- **Stackable credential policies;**
- **Job-driven financial aid policies; and**
- **Skills-based Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) policies.**<sup>2</sup>

Each of these policies on its own will expand access to skills, credentials, and careers by removing a particular barrier that currently keeps low-income, low-skilled, or working learners from pursuing and succeeding in middle-skill training. However, low-skilled people often face more than one barrier. For example, a working learner may benefit from both job-driven financial aid and stackable credentials when pursuing middle-skill training while working and raising a family. Accordingly, states should, over time, adopt the full agenda of skills equity policies in order to provide broad access to low-skilled people with multiple and diverse needs.

In addition to adopting the individual policies listed above, states may also adopt policies that align the central elements for learning pathways toward skilled careers in a single policy. These elements are: integrated education and skills training, career counseling, support services, high school equivalent credentials, industry-recognized and stackable postsecondary credentials, and industry engagement. By aligning the elements in a single policy, states can better ensure that individuals receive a comprehensive array of services and that the services complement one another.

Evidence supports that providing the central pathway elements to individuals typically produces better results. For example, a recent net impact evaluation of the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (CPI), discussed later in the toolkit, finds that compared to a matched population of community college students, CPI participants were six times as likely to earn an Associate’s Degree and three times as many had earned a Certificate of Proficiency or Technical Certificate. Twelve months after leaving college, CPI participants earned \$3,100 more per year than a matched pool of TANF participants.<sup>3</sup>

This toolkit addresses state policies that align central elements that enable low-skilled adults to follow pathways toward skilled careers in an industry sector or group of occupations.

States without policies can use this toolkit to establish them, and those with policies can use it to strengthen or scale up their existing policies. It contains:

- Guidance on key components of a robust alignment policy;
- Examples of state policies; and
- A legislative template for an alignment policy.

Policymakers and advocates can use this toolkit to:

- Inform key decisions for establishing or expanding alignment policies;
- Learn about best practice policies from other states; and
- Develop legislation that establish alignment policies.

### *What Is an alignment policy?*

An alignment policy combines the central elements that provide a pathway for low-income, low-skilled adults to attain stackable postsecondary credentials that have value in the labor market.

The central elements of a pathway are:

- Integrated education and skills training;
- Career counseling;
- Support services;
- High school diploma or equivalent credential;
- Training leading to industry-recognized and stackable postsecondary credentials; and
- Industry engagement.

This list of elements is similar to the ones included in the definition of career pathways codified in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Notable differences are the toolkit definition of aligned pathways explicitly includes support services and stackable credentials, while the WIOA definition of career pathways does not.<sup>4</sup> Because it is inclusive of the WIOA-listed elements, implementing an alignment policy will meet the WIOA requirements.<sup>5</sup>

Some states include additional elements in an alignment policy, perhaps most significantly, programs of study beginning in secondary school. However, given NSC's focus on adults and out-of-school youth, K-12 components are not included in this toolkit.

### *Why should states establish an alignment policy?*

Local areas can create pathways without state assistance. However, these attempts will face many challenges and be limited in scope without state support. For example, local areas will have limited resources without state assistance, and local pathways may not be recognized in other areas of the state.

By establishing policies states can:

- Provide resources to assist the creation and maintenance of aligned pathways;
- Facilitate the portability of pathways as individuals move from one area to another;
- Provide for quality control;
- Make changes in state policies for higher education, workforce development, social services, and other areas that will remove obstacles, provide resources, and enable local areas to create pathways; and
- Carry out the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act's (WIOA) requirement for states to support the development of career pathways.

## SECTION II. A GUIDE FOR STATE ALIGNMENT POLICIES

### *The components of a robust state alignment policy*

A state alignment policy requires and/or funds the alignment of the central elements that provide a pathway for low-skilled adults to attain industry-recognized and stackable postsecondary credentials. Robust policies both require and fund alignment. In order to be included in the toolkit, the policy must be statewide in scope, cover multiple occupational clusters or industry sectors, and not be limited to a specific sub population other than low-income and/or low-skilled adults. These criteria focus the toolkit on broad statewide policies.

Some state alignment policies aim solely to serve individuals who begin as adult education students<sup>6</sup>, while others also offer entry points to multiple levels of middle-skills training for people with different skill levels. The most robust policies provide adult education and multiple levels of middle-skills training and offer multiple entry points. Skills equity alignment policies that require and fund all the key pathway elements, and that are designed for adults who enter at any point that is sub-baccalaureate are in the strongest position to advance middle-skill training.

### *Requirement*

States should establish a requirement that community and technical colleges<sup>7</sup> and workforce agencies, in partnership with industry and community-based organizations, create pathways for adult learners that combine the key elements. States may establish the requirement either by statute or by an administrative policy adopted by the appropriate agency or agencies.

States should go beyond simply indicating that they will comply with the federal requirements to establish career pathways under WIOA, and establish their own state requirements. States should do this, for among other reasons, because WIOA has limited authority over postsecondary institutions that are a critical part of providing aligned pathways for adult learners.

Colorado has instituted a robust pathways framework by state legislation (House Bill 13-1165 and House Bill 15-1274). The legislation requires the creation of pathways in manufacturing, construction, healthcare, and information technology

industries, and two additional pathways each year. The legislation charges the State Workforce Development Council to design the pathways in collaboration with the Department of Higher Education, the Department of Labor and Employment, the Department of Education, and the Office of Economic Development - in consultation with local workforce boards, colleges, and area vocational schools.

The legislation requires that pathways span secondary school, adult education, and multiple postsecondary options, including registered apprenticeships, with "non-duplicative, clearly articulated course progression from one level of instruction to the next." There must be opportunities to earn postsecondary credits during secondary school and to maximize credits for prior learning. The pathways must include industry-validated stackable credentials, technical skills assessments that lead to industry certifications, and multiple entry and exit points.

The pathways must include integrated education and training that embeds learning and skill-building in a work related context. Academic and career counseling must be available, including the development of individual academic and career plans beginning in K-12. Pathways must include wraparound support services, particularly at transition points along the pathways. The legislature also provides a small amount of funding for need-based grants. Industry must be engaged throughout the process of designing and implementing pathways.

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The Colorado legislature has appropriated about \$500,000 from the general fund per year for implementation.

While Colorado created the state’s pathway framework through legislation, it is possible for a state to instead establish aligned pathways through administrative policy. There are advantages to the legislative process including creating greater buy-in among policymakers, the ability to make statutory changes that remove obstacles or facilitate interagency coordination, and the authorization of funding. But in some cases, particularly when a state’s community and technical colleges are largely independent, administrative policy may be more feasible than legislation.

Oregon may have the most extensive system of aligned pathways of any state, and the system was established by administrative policy, not statute. In 2006, the Oregon Presidents Council signed a Career Pathways Resolution affirming the community colleges’ commitment to career pathways. The Presidents have renewed their commitment every two years since then. The career pathways include the alignment of all key elements: education, training, guidance, support services, sequential course offerings from grade ten through associate degrees, stackable credentials, and industry engagement. The colleges have created roadmaps for over 350 career pathways.

## **States should provide funding to support aligned pathways toward skilled careers.**

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### *Funding*

States should provide funding to support aligned pathways toward skilled careers. It requires resources, for example, to develop curriculum for integrated education and skills training, to provide professional development for faculty, to design stackable postsecondary credentials, and to offer support services.

States should use a variety of funding sources to support aligned pathways. States should use state general funds and federal funds from WIOA Title I and Title II, Perkins, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). States and providers should braid the funds. For example, states and providers should use WIOA Title II and Perkins funds to support integrated education and skills training. State and local workforce boards should use WIOA Title I funds to pay for support services for Title I participants in Perkins funded training. States should use SNAP E&T funds to match state dollars for adult education, training, and support services for SNAP recipients.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to braiding federal and state funds to support aligned pathways, states should also appropriate state funds to agencies to design statewide frameworks for aligned pathways, as in the example of Colorado. States should also allocate state funds to local providers that directly serve individuals.

Many states encourage the creation of aligned pathways by providing funding to providers without issuing a requirement that providers must establish aligned pathways. Some of the most extensive state pathway systems in the nation were formed without a state requirement. But states with a requirement also provide funding.

For example, Oregon, which has a state policy establishing aligned pathways, also provides grants to community colleges to support career pathways. The grants are used, in part, for career pathways coordinators at each of the colleges. Funding comes from a variety of sources, including Oregon’s Employer Workforce Training fund, WIOA Title I, Perkins, and the state general fund. For the 2015-17 biennium, there is \$2 million for a statewide coordinator and college grants.

Wisconsin's Technical College system provides funding and technical assistance for an extensive system of aligned pathways.<sup>9</sup> The pathways are not required by the state; however they exist at each of the sixteen technical colleges. The pathways include all the essential components of aligned pathways. The pathways include ones designed for K-14 students and bridge programs for adult basic education students, providing multiple entry points and levels of training. The pathways began as part of the Shift Gears Initiative with funding from the Joyce Foundation, and were known as RISE (Regional Industry Skills Education) and are now known as Wisconsin Career Pathways. Today, the Technical Colleges' Workforce Advancement Program awards grants (\$4 million for FY 2016-17) that may be used to support career pathways, among other activities.

Arkansas was an early funder of aligned pathways that provide multiple entry points and levels of training through the Career Pathways Initiative (2005 Act 1705 and 2007 Act 514). Since 2005, the Career Pathways Initiative has funded the development of comprehensive, aligned pathways for economically disadvantaged individuals using TANF funds. The initiative aligns all the key elements of pathways to skilled careers. Two-year colleges and Technical Centers organize the pathways. The budget for FY 2016 is \$6.8 million, with about \$170,000 to \$600,000 per site.

More recently, in 2015 Arkansas enacted SB 891/Act 1131, a new pathways initiative serving a broader population. The Workforce Initiative Act creates a fund, using state general revenues, to support planning, development, and implementation of local career pathways that span secondary schools through higher education. The Department of Higher Education administers the Regional Workforce Grants that are allocated through a competitive RFP process. A community college or university must serve as the lead applicant and fiscal agent for a Regional Workforce Alliance. Alliances may receive planning grants for up to \$100,000, implementation grants for up to \$1 million over two years, or continuation grants for up to \$1 million over two years. Pathway must include: the engagement of multiple employers; basic skills instruction concurrent with occupational training; support services; academic and career counseling; and apprenticeship or other training programs.

Another example of a state policy that provides funding for aligned pathways with multiple entry points is Iowa's PACE program. Iowa Code 2014, Chapter 260H establishes the Pathways for Academic Career and Employment (PACE) Fund, authorizing up to \$5 million per fiscal year from the general fund that is available to community colleges, who work in partnership with industry and non-profit organizations. PACE includes a complete aligned pathways framework for low skill and low income adults, including integrated education and skills training, career counseling, support services, and stackable postsecondary credentials.

### *Funding for adult education pathways*

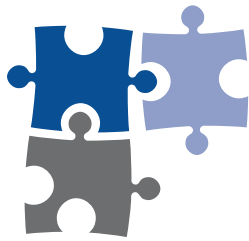
More common are state funding policies that support programs that focus solely on adults needing basic education. These policies align the key pathway elements beginning with integrated education and skills training and may end with an initial postsecondary credential.<sup>10</sup> These pathways are often referred to as "bridge programs", as they provide bridges from pre-college to college level instruction. Many of these programs started as part of a national initiative funded by philanthropic foundations, but the state is now providing funding.

Minnesota's FastTRAC program, now known as Pathways to Prosperity, is one of the best known state bridge programs. Started as part of the Shifting Gears Initiative with funding from the Joyce Foundation, the Minnesota legislature funds the Department of Employment and Economic Development to allocate grants to local partnerships of colleges, community-based organizations, workforce agencies, employers and others to train adults with low basic skills for entry level employment. Services include integrated adult education, career specific training, career counseling, career navigators<sup>11</sup>, support services, and employment placement and retention. The training provides college credits that are applicable toward certificate and degree programs in the same field. The program is now supported with \$3 million from the state's Workforce Development Fund.<sup>12</sup>

Beginning in 2010 the North Carolina legislature has authorized funding for the Basic Skills Plus program offered through the state's community colleges. Approved Basic Skills Plus providers may use up to 20 percent of their adult literacy funding to provide instruction and training for eligible students. Students performing at the adult secondary education level and who are co-enrolled in occupational and adult education courses while earning their adult high school diploma or a recognized high school equivalency credential are eligible. The program aligns all the essential elements of aligned pathways: integrated education and training, stackable credentials, counseling, support services, secondary and postsecondary credentials, multiple entry and exit points, to prepare students for jobs in an occupational cluster or sector.

State funding for aligned pathways for students beginning in adult education is a major step forward. NSC recommends, however, that state alignment policies include a state requirement and funding for aligned pathways that offer multiple entry points from adult education through middle-skill training. The legislative template in the next section of the toolkit provides a model for this recommendation.





# Alignment Policy

## LEGISLATIVE TEMPLATE

**This template can be used to develop legislation or inform a state administrative policy in support of a state alignment policy. Other National Skills Coalition toolkits offer additional legislative language on pathway elements, such as stackable credentials, that a state may want to incorporate into aligned pathways legislation.**

### SEC. 1: INTENT

The Aligned Pathways Framework and Aligned Pathways Grant Program are established for the purpose of developing and supporting pathways for low-skilled adults to attain skilled careers.

### SEC. 2: DEFINITIONS.

As used in this Act:

- a. State Board means [either the state workforce development board or the board overseeing community colleges].
- b. Aligned pathways means the combination of integrated education and training, career counseling, support services, high school equivalency credentials, and industry-recognized, stackable postsecondary credentials to prepare individuals for careers in an industry sector or group of occupations.
- c. Integrated education and training means a service approach that provides adult education and literacy activities concurrently and contextually with workforce preparation activities and workforce training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster for the purpose of educational and career advancement.
- d. Stackable postsecondary credential means an industry-recognized credential offered by a certificate or other non-degree program, which articulates toward a higher level certificate or associates degree in the same occupational area.

### SEC. 3: ALIGNED PATHWAYS FRAMEWORK

The State Board in collaboration with the [other state agencies overseeing or administering workforce training, postsecondary education, and adult education], and in consultation with local workforce development boards, community and technical colleges, non-profit organizations, and industry shall design a framework for a system of aligned pathways. The framework shall include:

- a. Aligned pathways leading to employment in the state's targeted industry sectors [either list sectors or identify by reference];
- b. Multiple entry and exit points for adult learners of different skills and abilities from adult education through applied associate degree programs;
- c. Engagement of industry or sector partnerships in the design and implementation of aligned pathways;
- d. Engagement of local workforce boards, community colleges, adult education providers, community-based organizations, and other local partners;
- e. Apprenticeship and other work-based learning options when available in the area; and
- f. Outreach to and advising of pathway participants and potential pathway participants including but not limited to secondary students and out-of-school youth.

### SEC. 4: ALIGNED PATHWAYS GRANT PROGRAM

The Aligned Pathways Grant Program is established to provide grants to Sector Partnerships for the purpose of creating and sustaining aligned pathways that are consistent with the Aligned Pathways Framework established by the State Board.

- a. The State Board shall administer the Aligned Pathways Grant Program.
- b. The State Board shall allocate Aligned Pathway Grants to eligible local sector partnerships through a competitive process. To be eligible, a sector partnership must meet the definition of an industry or sector partnership under Public Law 113-128,<sup>13</sup> and submit a proposal to the State Board that describes participation in the design and implementation of the aligned pathway by:

- i. Employers representing a substantial share of employment in the aligned pathway sector or group of occupations in the geographic area represented by the sector partnership;
  - ii. Each community college in the geographic area represented by the sector partnership that offers one or more programs of study in the aligned pathway's industry sector or group of occupations;
  - iii. Each local workforce development board in the geographic area represented by the sector partnership;
  - iv. Adult education providers in the area; and
  - v. Community-based and other non-profit organizations as appropriate; and may include:
  - vi. Representatives of secondary or K-12 education.
- c. Sector partnerships may form an aligned pathway committee to facilitate the participation requirements in Sec. 4(b).
- d. Eligible activities that may be funded by an Aligned Pathways grant include activities that are connected to an aligned pathway and that are consistent with the Aligned Pathways Framework established by the State Board including, but not limited to developing and providing as part of an aligned pathway:
- i. Integrated education and training;
  - ii. Career counseling;
  - iii. Support services; and,
  - iv. Training leading to industry-recognized and stackable postsecondary credentials.
- e. The State Board shall provide technical assistance to sector partnerships on developing and sustaining aligned pathways.

## SEC. 5: FUNDING

Sec. 5: For the period \_\_\_ to \_\_\_, \$\_\_\_ in state general funds are appropriated to the State Board for Sec. 3 of this Act. For the period \_\_\_ to \_\_\_, \$\_\_\_ in state general funds are appropriated to the State Board for Sec. 4 of this Act, of which, up to 15 percent may be retained by the State Board for administering grants and providing technical assistance.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Middle-skill training is postsecondary training for jobs that do not require a baccalaureate degree.
- <sup>2</sup> **Integrated education and training policies** help low-skilled people gain basic skills necessary to succeed in postsecondary training and skilled careers by teaching math, reading, or spoken English concurrently with and in the context of training for a specific occupation or industry.
- Stackable credential policies** help low-skilled people balance work and training by providing short-term, industry-recognized credentials that count toward education requirements for a longer-term credential. The short-term credentials help people find skilled work while preparing for the next step in their career. Since they articulate to a longer credential, stackable credentials allow working learners to temporarily "stop out" of their education while they work or attend to family needs without losing credit for prior education.
- Job-driven financial aid policies** make middle-skill training more affordable. They provide grants or tuition waivers to students in postsecondary middle-skill training programs, including students enrolled in short-term occupational programs and those who do not qualify for financial aid because they are enrolled less than half-time.
- Skills-based Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) policies** combine education, training, and support services, such as child care, transportation, and books and supplies to give SNAP participants the training and supports needed to earn postsecondary credentials and start family-supporting careers.
- <sup>3</sup> College Count\$, *Evidence of Impact Study: The Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative: Phase One Research Results*, 2016.

- <sup>4</sup> When describing a state's policy, the toolkit uses the term 'career pathway' if that is the term used by the state.
- <sup>5</sup> WIOA requires the State Workforce Development Board to assist the Governor in the development of strategies to support the use of career pathways. Sec. 101(d)(3)(B)
- <sup>6</sup> The toolkit uses the term "adult education" to include Adult Basic Education, English as a Second language, and other programs that provide adult literacy or numeracy instruction below the postsecondary level.
- <sup>7</sup> Other than community colleges, states vary in the types and names of their sub-baccalaureate postsecondary institutions. The toolkit uses the term, community and technical colleges, but intends to be inclusive of sub-baccalaureate postsecondary institutions.
- <sup>8</sup> More information on funding aligned pathway elements is included in NSC's other skills equity toolkits. See also, CLASP, *Funding Career Pathways*, February 2016.
- <sup>9</sup> For an overview, see: Wisconsin Center on Strategy, *Wisconsin Career Pathways*.
- <sup>10</sup> Often, the initial credential stacks to higher levels of certificates and degrees that are not funded as part of the pathway.
- <sup>11</sup> Career navigators are a common feature of pathway programs. These program staff help individuals find their way to appropriate services that meet their needs.
- <sup>12</sup> Minnesota code, [Chapter 1 H.F.No. 3](#), 2015.
- <sup>13</sup> Public Law 113-128 references the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

## **ABOUT NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION'S SKILLS EQUITY AGENDA**

National Skills Coalition is advocating for states to adopt a set of policies that expand equitable access to middle-skill training, credentials, and careers – particularly for those who have faced barriers to economic opportunity.

This effort includes scans of all fifty states to ascertain whether states have the policies in place to expand access to skills. NSC has also developed toolkits that provide resources, including model legislation, for policymakers and advocates to advance a skills equity agenda in their state. NSC's skills equity agenda includes state policies on Job-Driven Financial Aid, SNAP E&T, Stackable Credentials, Alignment, Integrated Education and Training, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Employment and Training.

**Read more about NSC's Skills Equity Agenda  
at [nationalskillscoalition/skillsequity](https://nationalskillscoalition.org/skillsequity)**

**National Skills Coalition** organizes broad-based coalitions seeking to raise the skills of America's workers across a range of industries. We advocate for public policies that invest in what works, as informed by our members' real-world expertise. We communicate these goals to an American public seeking a vision for a strong U.S. economy that allows everyone to be part of its success.

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**NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION**

Every worker. Every industry. A strong economy.