

States Need Clarity, Resources to Scale Access and Maximize Investments in Data

Leading states are developing programs and tools to provide students, parents, counselors, and job seekers with better data that enables people to make informed decisions about their education and workforce journeys. These tools also provide policymakers with necessary insights into the quality and value of state education and workforce investments. **With additional federal investments, clearer guidance, and targeted support to smooth the barriers involved in cross-agency data sharing, these resources could be developed more efficiently and at scale.**

The exemplars provided below demonstrate the kinds of resources that are possible when states have clarity about the parameters and rules for linking education, labor, workforce, and other data securely. But none of them are ideal.

With better clarity on the parameters for sharing data, navigating privacy requirements, and leveraging existing sources of funds, it would be easier for additional states to follow the examples set by the leading states described below and create these kinds of resources at scale. Developing resources and tools that provide value for students, job seekers, parents, the public, and policymakers would be easier to do.

Auto-Admit Programs that Facilitate College Access

States have been seeking to ease the transition from high school to college, particularly for students of color, students from low-income families, and first generation college-goers for years. Robust data tools have the potential to reduce some of the common barriers to navigating admissions and enrollment by automating steps and centralizing information. The following examples demonstrate how states have harnessed the power of their data systems to begin easing access to college.

California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI): [CCGI](#) works with individual K–12 districts and California’s higher education systems to address disconnects among course-taking, college eligibility, and course placement for students, families, and educators, allowing them to make informed decisions about college and career pathways. In real time, CCGI allows students to compare their high school transcripts (showing course-taking) to the A-G admissions requirements of California’s public higher education institutions. When the work of scaling CCGI across California is complete, all students, families, and districts will be able to freely access the data within CCGI to plan their college and career journeys. Creating a system like CCGI is time consuming and requires clear federal guidance about how to share individual-level K–12 and postsecondary data and provide access to that data while complying with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Idaho’s Direct Admission: In 2015, Idaho began a direct admission program, [Next Steps Idaho](#), which provides high school students with a letter telling them they have met the admission requirements to attend a state college. Students still need to submit an application, but they do so knowing they will be admitted. According to a [2022 study](#), the program raised first-time student enrollment by eight percent and in-state student enrollment by 12 percent. Idaho is able to access K–12 transcript, postsecondary admissions, and financial aid data without negotiating data-sharing agreements because the state’s K–12 and postsecondary institutions reside within the same agency. For other states, this kind of data sharing requires both a commitment from multiple agencies to securely share data and an assessment of often confusing and conflicting requirements in federal and state privacy laws. And for most states, financial aid data is inaccessible because under the Higher Education Act, it cannot be shared for purposes of program improvement or to reduce inequities.

Arizona Attainment Alliance: Just this year, Northern Arizona University (NAU) [announced an agreement](#) with 10 community college districts to offer students a type of direct admission. Students who are not prepared for NAU's four-year degree programs will be offered admission to a community college with a promise of seamless transfer to NAU. The Alliance's work will strengthen dual enrollment programs, career pathways, and increase bachelor's degree attainment in Arizona. The success of this project will depend, in part, on the ease of sharing data between K–12 schools, community college districts, and four-year institutions like NAU. For students to make informed decisions about which career pathway to explore based on career outcomes, the state likely will need to pull in wage data from the Industrial Commission of Arizona. Having federal guidance on using wage data for purposes like building a robust auto-admit program would allow projects like Arizona's to continue growing and ease more students' paths to and through college.

Minnesota Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System (MN SLEDS): Minnesota is using its [state P–20W data system](#) to help pilot an auto-admission program for high school students from low-income families, modernizing systems to reduce barriers and burden to postsecondary access. For all students, the SLEDS website currently [offers a tool](#) that enables students to see aggregate information on hourly wages for students who enter the workforce directly from high school. But, to see detailed [employment outcomes for college graduates](#), students have to go to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) website. Students should be able to review and understand the connections between postsecondary program choices and potential job outcomes/earnings without having to navigate multiple state websites. Federal guidance outlining the permissibility of using wage data for this purpose would allow states like Minnesota to consolidate these planning tools in one location, making it easier for students to find and use.

Career Explorer Tools that Enable Individuals to Make Informed Decisions

States are looking to address the mismatch between education and training choices of individuals and the needs of employers by empowering people with information about wage outcomes associated with different careers and the skills required for those career pathways. Much of this mismatch is a result of weak data linkages that create large gaps in information about what education and training programs result in high-quality careers. When individuals have this information, however, they can more easily weigh the tradeoffs of their decisions. When employers have this information, they can be more effectively target, recruit, and enhance a state's workforce.

Kentucky Career Explorer and My Colorado Journey: KY STATS' [Career Explorer](#) and Colorado Department of Higher Education's [My Colorado Journey](#) provide students and job seekers with information they need to stay informed about possible career pathways. With both, individuals can plan and search for their future career based on desired salary (entry and median) or by their interests, skills, and goals. Like Minnesota's system, both the Colorado and KYSTATS systems use mostly aggregate data. With more granular data on things like wages, individuals could use these systems to get a clearer picture of how and where others with similar demographic makeups, skills, geographic constraints, or school histories have navigated different career pathways. KYSTATS' tools do incorporate insights from the state's unemployment insurance (UI) wage data because the data system is housed within the state's Education and Workforce Development Cabinet. Other states struggle to obtain the individual wage data required to provide particularized insights or even to fully understand for policymaking purposes where access and opportunity gaps exist because there is no clear federal guidance on whether UI wage data may be used for these purposes.

Kentucky and Indiana Employer Connectors: KYSTATS' [Career and Technical Employer Connector](#) and the [Indiana Employer Connector](#) allow employers to gather information about students participating in career and technical education (CTE) across the state in order to identify potential skilled employees to meet their personnel needs. These systems generally pull data from both K–12 and postsecondary CTE programs to show which schools offer particular CTE programs, the number of enrolled students, and the location of the programs so that current employers can target hiring efforts and future employers can identify whether the state possesses needed skilled workers. If Kentucky and Indiana wanted to make these tools useful to students as well they would have to navigate the aforementioned challenges to pulling in wage data.

Indiana Credential Finder: Working with Credential Engine, Indiana created a credential registry, the [Indiana Credential Finder](#), which allows users to search, find, and compare credential information, including earnings at one, two, three, and five years after credential completion. Credentials offer the promise of a path toward improved economic stability for individuals already in the workforce, but only if they provide a positive return on investment. Understanding which credentials provide that quality is valuable both for individuals looking to reskill and state policymakers trying to direct funding. Having more detailed wage data to include within a tool like a credential finder would provide both of these constituencies more precise programmatic quality information.

Tools to Connect Youth Educational and Supportive Services

Young people need cohesive support across the different parts of their lives to help them achieve their goals. In most states, the numerous agencies and organizations that serve youth and families operate in siloes. A lack of coordination and information sharing make it difficult to see the full picture of what young people need, identify service gaps, or address historical disparities.

Baltimore Youth Data Hub: The [Baltimore Youth Data Hub](#) enables the various local branches of state agencies (e.g., health and human services, parks and recreation, education) as well as non-profit organizations serving the City's youth to securely access and share state data, helping them to more effectively and equitably support Baltimore's children, youth, and families. This initiative was only possible because Baltimore's Promise was able to take on the work of navigating the legal and policy frameworks, and negotiating all of the MOUs required for data sharing—an effort which took several years. With targeted federal investment and support, states and localities could support efforts like Baltimore's by design and at scale, making it possible to more efficiently ensure youth are connected to all of the services they need to thrive.

Allegheny County (PA) Analytics: The [Allegheny County \(PA\) Data Warehouse](#) incorporates 21 categories of data at the local, state, and federal levels, enabling coordinated services across multiple family-supporting sectors like health and home visiting. As a result, Allegheny County is able to proactively offer support to some of its most vulnerable residents, such as young mothers from low-income backgrounds. Allegheny County has created clear, accessible tools that the public can use to access its warehouse, including their Analytics tool. While this is largely health and human services data, Allegheny County has incorporated some K–12 education data from local school districts. These data linkages between health and education show the data collaboration opportunities that could be possible across many sectors (e.g., education, workforce, health) with clear federal guidance. Currently, very few localities or states have the capacity that Allegheny County possesses. Clear guidance and investment is necessary to incentivize and support states in creating resources like Allegheny County's Analytics tool.