

# RAISING THE BAR

## STATE STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING AND APPROVING HIGH-QUALITY CAREER PATHWAYS

### Executive Summary

Industry-aligned career pathways — defined as *a sequence of learning experiences that span secondary and postsecondary systems, blend rigorous core academic and career technical instruction, offer focused career guidance and advisement systems, include high-quality work-based learning experiences, and culminate in postsecondary or industry credentials of value*<sup>1</sup> — can make education more relevant for students, build connections to the workforce, and allow students to develop career-relevant skills.

While examples of high-quality career pathways abound in every state, all too often these pathways exist as islands of excellence, requiring state leaders to leverage policy, programs and resources to ensure that all learners have access to such high-quality learning experiences. One important lever states can use to support and expand high-quality career pathways is the review and approval process. Regardless of the approach, states must ensure that the approval process is used not simply as a checklist but rather as a mechanism to drive consistency and quality statewide.

### ***Raising the Bar: State Strategies for Developing and Approving High-Quality Career Pathways***

explores three states' strategies — Tennessee, New Jersey and Delaware — for leveraging career pathway approval processes to promote a vision of quality. While all three state examples focus on approval processes for Career Technical Education (CTE) programs of study specifically, the lessons apply more broadly and can be used to support state efforts to strengthen and scale employer-led career pathways.

**>>> Tennessee:** In 2013, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) undertook a rigorous, multi-phase review of its existing programs. The goal of this review was to embed rigorous academic standards throughout the educational continuum and align programs with state economic needs. The effort resulted in the discontinuation of

### Key Terms: Career Pathway vs. Program of Study

A **career pathway** is a sequence of learning experiences that span secondary and postsecondary systems, blend rigorous core academic and career technical instruction, offer focused career guidance and advisement systems, include high-quality work-based learning experiences, and culminate in postsecondary or industry credentials of value.

A **program of study**, a requirement under the federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, is one type of career pathway. A program of study is a non-duplicative sequence of academic and technical courses that include secondary- and postsecondary-level content and opportunities for high school students to earn postsecondary credit and culminate in industry-based credentials and/or postsecondary degrees. In many states, programs of study are the primary way students access career pathways.

nearly 100 courses between 2014 and 2018 that were identified as duplicative, low quality and/or not aligned to industry needs. To maintain rigorous and relevant programs, each program of study is subject to an annual justification process whereby TDOE officials examine labor market data and the availability of aligned postsecondary pathways to determine which programs should be discontinued. Additionally, the state empowers local program administrators to continuously evaluate and improve their programs by providing both additional data indicators and targeted professional development.

**>>> New Jersey:** In New Jersey, the state Department of Education (NJDOE) reviews locally developed programs to ensure that they are aligned with quality criteria and have relevant postsecondary and workforce linkages. The criteria for reviewing and approving secondary programs are outlined in regulations in the administrative code for Career and Technical Education Programs.<sup>2</sup> In 2008, the NJDOE took a more hands-on approach to reviewing existing approved programs and began using the established criteria as a mechanism to drive quality. This process required districts to submit documentation of program structure — including curriculum, teacher certification, partnerships and facilities and equipment — for each program offered within a specific Career Cluster®. While the NJDOE offered technical assistance to encourage and support districts to maintain their CTE programs, with the understanding that the programs needed to be aligned to the high-quality standards, many districts chose to discontinue their programs.

**>>> Delaware:** Delaware's process, in comparison, strikes a balance between those of Tennessee and New Jersey. In the 2015-16 school year, the state launched a streamlined approval process that allows districts to either adopt a secondary program of study from a menu of state-model programs or develop a local model, which is submitted and approved at the state level. Through this approach, Delaware establishes

linkages between secondary, postsecondary and career learning experiences statewide but also provides district administrators the flexibility to adopt programs of study that best meet their needs. To ensure that programs continue to be high-quality, Delaware has worked to align its program, fiscal and accountability policies with its vision for career readiness, encouraging all state systems to work harmoniously in support of the same vision.

Although Tennessee, New Jersey and Delaware each take a different approach to career pathways approval, a few lessons can be drawn from their work. States should examine their own approaches to program review and approval to determine whether or not these core elements are in place:

**>>> All relevant stakeholders contribute to the approval process** at both the state and local levels. This engagement can help to identify implementation challenges, generate buy-in and support for the career pathways approval process, and protect against future opposition to new reform efforts.

**>>> Career pathways approval is driven by regional and state economic needs** to ensure that career pathways are aligned to career opportunities. Each of the states profiled regularly examines labor market data to determine if career pathways are still relevant.

**>>> Linkages to postsecondary and workforce opportunities are prioritized.** States' approval processes should ensure that all career pathways have multiple entry and exit points and extend across the entire learning continuum to enrich the learning experience and position learners for success.

As state leaders work to adopt such elements into their career pathways approval strategies, they must first identify which tools are available to define and promote the implementation of high-quality career pathways in all communities. **Using quality criteria to**

**improve career pathways** is one place to start. All states have a process in place to review and evaluate career pathways, but not all use it to enforce quality standards. Further, states can **leverage fiscal policy to prioritize quality** by withholding funds for programs that do not meet specific quality criteria. Another key lever is **promoting quality through the state accountability system** by adopting career readiness indicators that signal which elements districts and schools should prioritize in career pathway development. Finally, states should **support regional**

**implementation** by providing technical assistance, professional development and other resources to local career pathway implementers. This strategy helps raise awareness of what quality looks like and empowers local leaders to drive quality in a more sustainable way.

No single perfect strategy is perfect for promoting high-quality career pathways, but it is imperative that states define and drive quality, expand career pathways to success, and contribute to a thriving economy.

The full report can be accessed online at <https://careertech.org/resource/raising-the-bar-state-strategies-for-developing-and-approving-high-quality-career-pathways>.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the operating definition for “career pathways” under the New Skills for Youth initiative. The definition was taken from the grant guidelines, available at <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2015/NSFYStateGrantGuidelinesFINAL.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> NJAC 6A:19-3.1. Retrieved from <http://www.state.nj.us/education/code/current/title6a/chap19.pdf>