

## New Skills for Youth Phase One Snapshot: Illinois

Illinois has a strong track record of implementing college and career readiness reforms focused on improving student outcomes. The state entered New Skills for Youth (NSFY) with a goal of boosting degree and credential attainment for working-age adults to 60% by 2025. Under New Skills for Youth, the team aimed to boost degree and credential attainment for working-age adults to 60% by 2025. During Phase One, the state focused on adding career readiness indicators to the accountability system and meaningfully engaging with critical stakeholders to inform the implementation of the rest of the strategic plan.

### Foundations for the Work

In 2007, the Illinois College and Career Readiness Pilot Program was enacted to provide funding for high schools and community colleges to pilot programs to improve student outcomes. The legislation supported the alignment of K-12 math and English curricula with college-level coursework to strengthen the transition from secondary to postsecondary education.

The [Illinois Pathways Initiative](#) began in 2011 following recommendations from the state's P-20 council. This initiative is a public-private partnership among secondary and postsecondary education and employers focused on implementing high-quality science,

technology, engineering and math (STEM) programs of study. Also in 2011, Illinois was awarded funds through the federal Race to the Top program. The state used the funds in part to develop a statewide longitudinal data system, which collects information on high school to college success, career pathways metrics and dual credit participation.

Illinois entered Phase One of NSFY with the desire to make decisions informed by the available data, and to implement new policies that would help the state achieve its goal of increasing the proportion of working-age adults with degrees or credentials to 60 percent by 2025.

*Phase One of JPMorgan Chase & Co.'s New Skills for Youth grant began in May 2016 and went through October 2016. With bold visions for improving career readiness in K-12 education, each Phase One state spent the grant period performing a diagnostic assessment of their career preparation system and preparing for implementation of a new action plan. This snapshot describes Illinois' experience in Phase One, including promising practices and innovations.*

# Work During Phase One

The Illinois NSFY team began Phase One by conducting an assessment of the state's career readiness system and student outcomes data. The team consists of representatives from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the Illinois Community College Board, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, and the Illinois Workforce Investment Board.

Through the assessment the team determined that much of the student and labor market data it needs are available, but the data are not used to drive career readiness work in a deliberate or coordinated way. The team also recognized the need to build career readiness into the state accountability system. The assessment revealed that the cross-sector groups that work on specific career readiness initiatives, such as the team that wrote and began implementation of the state's federal Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act plan, have strong partnerships. However, the assessment also made clear that an increased amount of meaningful stakeholder engagement is required for more successful reforms.

Based on the findings from the assessment, the team developed a three-year action plan for career readiness reforms to reach the state's goal of 60 percent of the population obtaining degrees or credentials by 2025. The plan focuses around four main strategies:

- Expand statewide and local cross-sector partnerships and involve partners, specifically employers, throughout the process.

- Obtain statewide agreement on definitions of career readiness; indicators of quality career pathways; high-skill, high-demand sectors statewide and regionally; and industry-recognized credentials.
- Build capacity, promoting educator development and working across systems and institutions to create high-quality, scaled career pathways.
- Align systems and funding streams in support of quality career pathways, including feedback loops.

## *Improving Accountability Systems*

During summer 2016, the Illinois General Assembly passed the [Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness \(PWR\) Act](#). This legislation requires the state to develop model postsecondary and career expectations for students in grades 8-12, establish a competency-based high school graduation requirements pilot program, and create college and career pathway endorsements for high school diplomas. While much of the work to create this legislation happened before NSFY, the cross-sector team effectively incorporated the act into its plans and used it as a foundation for other strategies related to accountability.

Also during Phase One, the cross-sector team assisted ISBE in developing and approving a draft framework for a college and career readiness definition. Under this new framework, students are deemed to be college and career ready if they meet the following benchmarks:

- Attainment of a grade point average of 2.8 or above out of 4.0;

- Attainment of a readiness college entrance score on the SAT;
- Two or more of the following:
  - Attainment of an industry credential,
  - Completion of a dual credit career pathways course,
  - Attainment of a 3 or higher on an Advanced Placement exam,
  - Attainment of a passing grade in an Advanced Placement course,
  - Completion of a dual credit college English and/or math course,
  - Completion of Algebra II, or
  - Attainment of a 4 or higher the International Baccalaureate exam; and
- Two or more of the following:
  - 90 percent attendance,
  - 25 hours of community or military service,
  - Participation in a workplace learning experience, or
  - Participation in two or more organized co-curricular activities.

After the framework was developed, ISBE also added a career readiness accountability measure to the state's School Report Card. This measure will incorporate the definition of college and career readiness outlined above. ISBE will adopt its final accountability model in early 2017, which will indicate the specific career readiness measures the state will use.

## ***Stakeholder Engagement***

The cross-sector team made meaningful stakeholder engagement a major focus of Phase One. Statewide stakeholder meetings and webinars were held to obtain guidance on the goals and vision for career readiness in Illinois, the components of high-quality career pathways, and potential activities for the three-year strategic plan. Participants in these

meetings included representatives from the Governor's Office, the General Assembly, ISBE, the Workforce Investment Board, the P-20 Council, the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, the Illinois Education Association, the Illinois Federation of Teachers, educators, and numerous members of the business community. Stakeholder attendance at these meetings was particularly meaningful, given that a state budget impasse meant that no participants were reimbursed for expenses related to their participation, such as for travel.

During these meetings, participants mentioned numerous projects and initiatives happening throughout the state that overlap or link to NSFY. This information provided the team with a more thorough description of state and local career readiness initiatives than had previously been possible. The team used the information gathered at these meetings to incorporate new elements into the strategic plan and increase efficiency.

The team also met during Phase One with a business and industry focus group consisting of employer representatives of different sectors in the Chicago metropolitan area. The employers in attendance gave input on which academic and soft skills are needed by entry-level employees in their respective sectors. Hiring challenges they face were identified, and it was suggested that career readiness preparation programs should be provided to all students beginning no later than high school. The employers urged the team to collect data on the number of students whom obtain credentials which could be tied to state employment data. This deliberate employer engagement generated enthusiasm among the business leaders and the cross-sector team, and more meetings have been planned.

## Looking Ahead

The cross-sector team will continue to work with employers and ISBE to implement the PWR Act, as well as finalize the college and career readiness framework and accountability

measures. Once that framework is in place, the cross-sector team will focus on improving professional development for secondary Career Technical Education educators so that they are appropriately prepared to help students meet the college and career readiness benchmarks

