

New Skills for Youth Phase One Snapshot: North Carolina

The North Carolina New Skills for Youth (NSFY) Phase One project team envisions a career readiness system that exposes students to career preparation, work-based learning, rigorous academic and technical coursework, career development plans for grades 9-14, career pathway completion and career exploration. During Phase One, the state made early progress toward achieving this vision by developing a work-based learning toolkit, piloting a work-based learning survey, and creating a plan of action that leverages employer expertise at the state level through key industry networks.

Foundations for the Work

In recent years, North Carolina has demonstrated a commitment to cross-agency collaboration through Governor Pat McCrory's [NCWorks Commission](#). The Commission, a 33-member workforce governance body designed to unify higher education, K-12 and workforce development, advances the mission of ensuring that North Carolina has an innovative, relevant, effective and efficient workforce development system that builds a pipeline of talent to meet workforce needs. The group also serves as the state's designated Workforce Investment Board under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014. Among other duties, NCWorks is responsible for certifying statewide career pathways. The Commission created [criteria](#) in 2015 to guide career pathway development and ensure consistency across the state.

These criteria define a certified career pathway as being demand driven and collaborative — ensuring buy-in from K-12, postsecondary, community and business leaders — and enabling students to take advantage of opportunities such as dual credit coursework, career guidance and work-based learning activities. North Carolina's career readiness system is designed to help students take advantage of these opportunities. In 2012, the state Legislature enacted a program called North Carolina [Career and College Promise](#) that allows secondary students to participate in coursework at community and technical colleges without paying tuition. North Carolina students also benefit from statewide articulation agreements that allow them to transfer credits from state-approved Career Technical Education (CTE) courses toward a postsecondary degree within the North Carolina Community College System.

Phase One of JPMorgan Chase & Co.'s New Skills for Youth grant extended from May to 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 its career preparation system and preparing for implementation of a new action plan. This snapshot describes North Carolina's experience and progress in Phase One, including promising practices and innovations.

Work During Phase One

North Carolina's action plan and early work in Phase One were informed by a theory of change that acknowledges that all students should be prepared for future careers and that a traditional high school degree is insufficient for good jobs in the modern economy. North Carolina believes that students must have access to an educational system that includes career preparation, work-based learning, rigorous academic and technical coursework, career development plans for grades 9-14, career pathway completion and career exploration to graduate career ready.

As such, North Carolina leveraged the NSFY Phase One grant to strengthen and systematize engagement with employers in the state and implement more robust career planning services for high school students. One of the state's key priorities for Phase One was to lay the foundation for a state-level system of Key Industry Networks (KIN) that would convene employers in priority sector areas to drive economic development. KINs would also help identify core skills and abilities for associated career pathways so that students could develop career-relevant competencies.

North Carolina planned to use Phase One grant funds to begin building career awareness resources, such as units and lessons aligned to the NC Essential Standards, to help middle school teachers raise awareness about career opportunities. Even with a state-approved career pathways framework in place, the North Carolina project team knew that engagement would have to start in earlier years so that students could take full advantage of the career learning opportunities afforded to

them. In fall 2016, the state began recruiting teachers and counselors to co-develop these resources.

North Carolina's Phase One needs assessment corroborated employer engagement and career awareness as focus areas. While employers at the local level were largely engaged in career pathway development, there was a need for state-level employer engagement to identify and endorse industry-recognized credentials with labor market value and to align work-based learning opportunities with priority industry sectors. Further, the needs assessment surfaced an opportunity to build upon local pockets of excellence to create and scale a statewide career guidance system.

WORK-BASED LEARNING



Figure 1: North Carolina's work-based learning toolkit defines career exploration and learning opportunities along the education continuum

Early Advances in Work-Based Learning

North Carolina's accomplishments in Phase One link directly to the state's theory of change. To strengthen work-based learning activities and lay the groundwork for future engagement with employers, North Carolina released a toolkit that articulates common definitions and provides an interactive roadmap for educating students, parents, career counselors and employers about

different types of work-based learning activities and the benefits each provides. This product resulted from a collaborative effort of the Department of Public Instruction, the Community College System, the National Academy Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce and the Department of Labor.

Additionally, North Carolina, aiming to address gaps in its statewide data collection system, piloted a survey to collect information about work-based learning activities. The survey inventoried the number of employers engaged, associated industry sectors, and the number of students participating in each type of work-based learning activity. The project team hopes to scale the survey pilot to better collect work-based learning data across the state and enable future progress monitoring and continuous improvement.

North Carolina's Action Plan

Moving forward, North Carolina plans to build upon this early work, using the existing career pathways infrastructure and authority of the NCWorks Commission, to catalyze career readiness system transformation in the state. North Carolina aims to work alongside the state Chamber of Commerce to engage employers and develop KINs that can assist in identifying career-relevant competencies and industry-recognized credentials for career pathways in priority economic sectors. Engaging employers at the state level will help ensure consistency and workforce relevance and help students develop the experiences and skills they need to be successful after graduation. Additionally, KINs will help level the playing field by bringing industry expertise to rural communities that have struggled to access and engage the employer community.

To ensure that all students have access to comprehensive career guidance, the project team plans to work with the State Board of Education to require all students in grades 9-14 to create career development plans. The plans will be used to guide academic and career learning opportunities throughout the education continuum. Further, North Carolina aims to expand the current Career Coaches program — a pilot program that establishes liaisons between secondary and postsecondary institutions to help expand access to career pathways experiences — and leverage funds from the Department of Commerce to support eight regional career pathways facilitators.

Looking Ahead

Despite a close gubernatorial election in 2016 and several leadership transitions at the state level, North Carolina has sown the seeds of sustainability by unifying state actors around a shared vision of success: [67 percent](#) of working-age North Carolinians with postsecondary education or training by 2025. This goal is shared by the Governor's Education Cabinet (which includes the Department of Public Instruction, the State Board of Education, the Community College System, North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities, and the Department of Commerce) and the NCWorks Commission. Each participating agency has worked to integrate this goal into its strategic plan and adopted activities to achieve this outcome. Furthermore, the NCWorks Commission is required by state law to serve as the state Workforce Investment Board and will likely continue its commitment to North Carolina's career readiness development work through state-level transitions.