

## New Skills for Youth Phase One Snapshot: Vermont

Vermont's approach to Phase One of the New Skills for Youth Initiative was to leverage the state's recent proficiency-based Flexible Pathways Initiative to encourage more students to participate in Career Technical Education (CTE) and work-based learning experiences. During the Phase One implementation and planning grant period, the state project team assigned a full-time staff member to coordinate work-based learning activities statewide and partnered with Castleton University to develop a work-based learning certification program for teachers. Additionally, the project team developed an action plan that aims to adopt a statewide career guidance strategy to help students make the most of the Flexible Pathways opportunities and graduate with workforce-relevant experiences.

### Foundations for the Work

In 2013, the Vermont Legislature adopted a proficiency-based graduation system through Act 77, also known as the [Flexible Pathways Initiative](#). The Initiative requires schools to work with students, parents and guidance counselors to develop a personalized graduation plan for each seventh- to ninth-grade student, drawing on his or her academic and career interests to build an educational pathway that meets the student's specific needs. Specifically, the legislation enables students to participate in a variety of alternative educational experiences such as work-based learning, CTE, dual enrollment and early college high schools, increasing the availability of meaningful opportunities for career preparation in high school. These

opportunities are codified in the State Board of Education's [Education Quality Standards](#).

The Flexible Pathways Initiative has begun to remove barriers and expand opportunities for students to participate in alternative educational experiences, but it is the state's [comprehensive economic strategy](#), released in 2014, that guides the state's work in CTE and workforce development. The strategy outlines a vision for future economic development in Vermont, identifying six priority industry sectors: tourism, travel and business systems; manufacturing, science, technology, engineering and math; construction, green building and design; local food systems, agriculture and natural resources; health/medical sciences; and information technology. This economic strategy, in

*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 Vermont's experience and progress in Phase One, including promising practices and innovations.*

conjunction with the alternative learning opportunities students can access through the Flexible Pathways Initiative, largely predicated Vermont's early work in Phase One of the New Skills for Youth Initiative and set the stage for the state's action plan.

## Work During Phase One

Vermont entered Phase One with the primary goal of strengthening career guidance to ensure that students could fully take advantage of alternative learning opportunities. The state's theory of change posits that investing in a career advising and guidance system that is aligned with employer-led, rigorous programs of study will allow Vermont to improve the economic conditions of both the state and its individuals, including historically marginalized and under-served groups.

Through the Phase One data analysis and needs assessment, Vermont uncovered key opportunities to build and strengthen a statewide career guidance system to achieve its vision for change. The state recognized that while the Flexible Pathways Initiative created ample opportunity for strong programs to develop and grow, quality was inconsistent across the state. Programs of study had developed in isolation and without intentional linkages to statewide economic needs.

Specifically, the project team noticed significant variations in the type and quality of work-based learning experiences that local school boards would approve for course credits. While the Agency of Education modified and released a [work-based learning manual](#) in July 2016, supporting a new requirement that every school have at least

one licensed work-based learning coordinator on staff, there was still work to be done to ensure consistency in local implementation of work-based learning experiences that are safe, legal, meaningful and connected to classroom learning.

## *Early Achievements in Work-Based Learning*

The Vermont project team directed efforts during Phase One to strengthen and centralize work-based learning quality — a strategy within the robust career guidance system that the project team envisioned would expand and transform career readiness across the state.

The project team recognized that one of its biggest challenges would be addressing disparities across local programs and creating and enforcing statewide standards for quality. The team assigned a full-time staff member on the state-level Flexible Pathways Initiative team to coordinate work-based learning statewide. This staff member is working to enforce the requirement that each school have at least one staff member licensed to coordinate work-based learning — a rule that aims to secure the quality and safety of work-based learning experiences at the local level.

Through a partnership with Castleton University, the Vermont Agency of Education also developed a program to qualify teachers to become licensed work-based learning coordinators at their schools. Given the rural nature of the state, the Vermont project team is hopeful that having a dedicated work-based learning coordinator embedded within the school staff will increase schools' ability to

engage employers and connect students with meaningful opportunities.

### *Action Planning Around the Flexible Pathways Initiative*

Vermont's action plan includes a multi-pronged approach for building a robust career guidance system — one that aims to strengthen the quality and relevance of career pathways while simultaneously scaling up a statewide framework. The guidance system will leverage the personalized learning plans required under the Flexible Pathways Initiative but will more intentionally link them to specific career pathways in high-demand industries identified in the state's economic strategy. To meet this goal, the team plans to engage key industry leaders in each priority sector, beginning with health care, to strengthen programs of study and identify associated workforce competencies.

The Vermont team plans to ensure widespread and consistent implementation of the career guidance system across the state. The team plans to do this by integrating career readiness indicators into the state accountability system and dedicating resources to both support local counselors and ensure quality performance tracking. The most recent accountability recommendations for Vermont's Every Student Succeeds Act state plan will hold school districts accountable for the total percentage of high school seniors participating in alternative educational opportunities such as

early college, dual enrollment, CTE coursework, service learning, work-based learning and virtual instruction. While the recommendations have yet to be finalized and the weights have not yet been determined, this plan would help motivate local districts to adopt and implement alternative learning opportunities embedded in the career guidance framework.

### **Looking Ahead**

By 2017-18, Vermont plans to roll out a new statewide career advising system that will include dedicated state personnel to help launch and implement the program and a web-based performance tracking database to enable the state to monitor career guidance activity. This statewide system, coupled with new career-focused accountability metrics, is designed to help policymakers promote a unified career guidance system across the state. The system is also designed to preserve local flexibility and enable school districts to adapt programs and activities to meet the needs of their students and local employers.

Additionally, Vermont is one of several states that experienced changes in state leadership during the 2016 elections. To ensure continuity across administrations, the project team has worked to secure commitments in the form of Memoranda of Understanding from a cross-section of stakeholders including leaders from K-12, higher education, labor, workforce development and business and industry.