

A close-up photograph of a young woman with curly hair, wearing clear safety glasses and a black respirator mask around her neck. She is smiling warmly at the camera. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be an industrial or workshop setting.

ESG

Education
Strategy
Group

THE SHIFTING AMERICAN ECONOMY

KEY MESSAGES

EDUCATION AND TRAINING BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL IS THE SUREST PATH TO LONG-TERM SUCCESS.

A high school diploma was once a ticket to long-term career success. Today, that's no longer true. Nearly every job created in the United States since the 2008 recession required some sort of education or training beyond high school. This doesn't mean that everyone needs a four-year college degree to succeed, but the best chance of securing a job that pays enough to support a family is through post-high school learning.

THE PANDEMIC HAS FUNDAMENTALLY ALTERED THE ECONOMY.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the economy, causing millions to lose their jobs and shuttering entire industries. Economic recovery is likely to speed up the pace at which the world of work is evolving and increase the requirements to be a competitive job-seeker. Some industries may never fully recover to pre-pandemic levels, closing off certain career pathways and further cementing the need for education or training beyond high school.

OPPORTUNITY GAPS HAVE GROWN DURING THE PANDEMIC.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has hit some groups harder than others. Gaps between high- and low-income groups, between those with less education and those with more education, between different racial and ethnic groups, and between men and women have all widened during the pandemic. These gaps may persist long after the pandemic ends, making it even more important for students to pursue higher education and give themselves the best chance at success.

THERE ARE MANY HIGH-QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL THAT CAN LEAD TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY.

The best way to be set up for success in our shifting economy is to pursue education and training in a field or industry that is growing and pays family-sustaining wages. Education and training after high school can take many forms:



Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are on-the-job learning of a skilled trade paired with postsecondary classroom learning and tend to be highly valued in the workforce. They are particularly prevalent for building trades (like electricians, plumbers, and carpenters) but also exist in manufacturing, healthcare, and financial services, and are increasing in importance in other fields.



Certifications

Certifications are issued by an organization with authority in a particular field — like a trade association. Though there is wide variation among different fields in what a certification means and represents, a particular type of certification can demonstrate desirable expertise or, in some cases, may be required for entry into a particular career — like an Advanced Emergency Medical Technician (AEMT) certification for paramedics.



Certificates

Certificates are issued by colleges and universities in specific fields and require less time to complete than an associate degree. Certificates can be used to prove that students have acquired specific skills or expertise in fields like health care, business, marketing, mechanical repairs, and many more.



Two-Year Degrees

A two-year associate degree typically includes both general education and career preparation needed to begin achieving academic and professional success in a given field in less time than a bachelor's degree requires. Two-year degrees can prepare students for entry-level positions in fields like healthcare and can be used as building blocks toward the eventual completion of a bachelor's degree.



Four-Year Degrees

A four-year bachelor's degree is the most expensive and time-consuming of these postsecondary options but is usually the strongest foundation for long-term economic success. Bachelor's degrees are available in a wide variety of fields and are required to obtain jobs in some of them.

KEY STRATEGY CONSIDERATIONS



1 LEVERAGE TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS AS TRUSTED COMMUNICATORS.

Families trust the teachers and counselors who know their children personally and interact with them on a daily basis. Many families are busy and place the highest priority on communications that come directly from their child's teacher(s); school-level communications are typically considered next most important, followed by those from the district. While districts can and should raise the significance of labor market shifts from the top, the success of these communications efforts depends largely on getting teachers and counselors to understand, accept, and share the messages as well. Districts should provide these and other communications materials to teachers and counselors to empower them to communicate directly with families about students' options for success in a shifting economy. Furthermore, given the capacity challenges facing most counselors, district leaders should also consider prioritizing professional development opportunities to equip teachers to serve in an advisory capacity and familiarize them with the range of high-value postsecondary options available beyond a four-year bachelor's degree.

How to Make It Happen

- Provide these and other resources to teachers and counselors to equip them with information and messages to effectively communicate about the shifting economy with their students. Set clear expectations (providing training if appropriate) for when and how teachers and counselors can use these resources in conversations with their students.
- Offer teacher externships to expose educators to specific fields that might be of interest to their students and empower them with resources and first-hand experiences to share with students.

- Consider developing microcredentials that count toward continuing education credits for license renewal or other professional development opportunities for classroom teachers to be trained as advisors and supplement the work of counselors.
- Consider larger-scale counselor training reform and/or ongoing professional development opportunities to ensure that counselors understand and accept the range of high-value postsecondary education and training options available to students in today's economy.

Other Resources to Explore

[Get Schooled](#) • [Talking Points](#)

2 TAKE ADVANTAGE OF COMMUNICATIONS OPPORTUNITIES THAT HAVE SHIFTED DUE TO THE PANDEMIC.

While communications from educators have typically been paid the greatest attention by parents and families, the unique circumstances of COVID-19 have opened up new opportunities for district-level communicators. Because of the need for critical logistics communication from districts over the course of the past year, many families are now paying much closer attention to communications from districts than they were prior to the onset of the pandemic. Districts should capitalize on this attention and use the digital methods used to communicate about virtual learning and other logistics to communicate with parents about other key issues related to the impact of COVID-19 — including the shifts in the labor market and what that means for their children's educational journeys.

How to Make It Happen

Communications opportunities that some districts have found to be particularly effective in this environment include:

- Webinars and other virtual "parent nights"
- Social media, including interactive chats for live Q+A
- Texting outreach and campaigns
- District-wide email campaigns

- District websites (increased traffic) with opportunities to update and standardize content across school-specific websites
- Leveraging existing or newly-created external advising support or college access partnerships as additional trusted channels to reach students

Other Resources to Explore

[EdNavigator](#) • [Family Engagement Lab](#) • [Springboard Collaborative](#)

KEY STRATEGY CONSIDERATIONS

3 WHERE POSSIBLE, USE REAL LABOR MARKET DATA WITH REAL OCCUPATIONS AND SALARY INFORMATION IN YOUR COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS.

Students and their families want concrete information about what their futures could look like. The most compelling communications will include localized information about labor market demand, growing occupations, and the salaries and education requirements associated with them. Local postsecondary partners — including community colleges — can be excellent partners and sources of this information. Use real information to build out sample education and career pathways for students and their families (using or adapting the templates provided in this toolkit) to illustrate promising options in concrete terms.

How to Make It Happen

- Partner with a local workforce board, community college or other postsecondary institution with its own trackers of local economic and labor market data.
- Purchase a subscription to a provider of real-time labor market information — like Emsi, JobsEQ, or Burning Glass Technologies — from across the United States. If budgets are tight, consider

partnering with other local districts to purchase group access.

- Couple data with storytelling to bring anonymous data to life and make it relevant for students and families.

Other Resources to Explore

[Emsi](#) • [JobsEQ](#) • [Burning Glass Technologies](#)

4 PARTNER WITH LOCAL EMPLOYERS AND POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS TO ADD THEIR VOICES TO THE CONVERSATION.

Just as real, localized labor market information adds legitimacy and value to communications efforts about the shifting economy, families also want to hear the voices of other real key players in their child's journey through education to a career. Local employers can offer their perspective on areas of growth and postsecondary credentials of value. Postsecondary leaders can add and validate concrete information about requirements, costs, logistics, and more related to different higher education options. Both of these constituencies would be valuable additions to live events or webinars on topics related to the shifting economy, and supplementing any written or visual communications with direct quotes from representatives from respected companies or institutions bolsters their effectiveness and legitimacy.

How to Make It Happen

- Establish formal partnerships and regular engagement with local workforce boards or chambers of commerce, who can serve as a collective voice for local employers and offer insights into employer needs.
- Work with local employers of significance to develop a rich array of work-based learning experiences for students.
- Invite local employers to speak at back-to-school nights, parent forums, or on webinars offered to families by the district.

• Include employer interviews, quotes, and other direct insights in communications materials related to the shifting economy and relevant postsecondary options for students. Make the employer voice a component of routine communications (by including an employer's section in e-newsletters to feature high-level advice from leaders of different companies and sectors).

Other Resources to Explore

[EdNavigator](#)

KEY STRATEGY CONSIDERATIONS



5 ENSURE THAT THESE COMMUNICATIONS ARE TARGETED AT ALL FAMILIES.

American education has a long history of steering certain students (typically White and higher-income) exclusively toward four-year college degrees and steering other students (typically students of color and/or from lower-income backgrounds) toward “other” options, which are often considered lesser-than. In order to advance educational equity and ensure that every student and parent is fully aware of the options available to them, it is critical that communications efforts about the shifting economy are targeted at EVERYONE — including the families that believe a four-year degree is the only acceptable option for their child. New Gallup [data](#) shows that a growing percentage of parents—nearly half—desire non-college pathway options for their children to pursue following high school graduation. The momentum is building for more widespread understanding and acceptance of a wider variety of postsecondary career preparation options, and districts can continue to build on this momentum with effective communications efforts. While no one should be discouraged from pursuing a four-year degree, it is important to validate the other options for success and ensure that they are presented as valuable options for everyone.

6 ELEVATE THESE COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS EVEN AMIDST ONGOING EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS.

With the ongoing pandemic-related challenges facing school districts across the country, it can be tempting to shift less-urgent priorities — like educating families about shifts in the economy and the implications for their children — to the back burner. However, failing to attend to these issues would do a tremendous disservice to students and families. At a time when postsecondary degrees and credentials have never been more important for economic mobility, we are seeing staggering drops in the number of students enrolling in higher education. This is not the time to back off on this issue; in fact, it should be treated as an emergency priority at all levels of educational leadership. Parents and students need to be aware of how the economy is changing and the urgency of planning ahead for long-term success.

How to Make It Happen

- Engage community voice and ensure that communications efforts are a two-way street. Find ways to solicit feedback and welcome questions from families who are looking for additional information. Listen to families' concerns and update messaging to address them.
- Make sure that communications about alternatives to direct four-year college enrollment are shared with all students — not just those pursuing CTE options in high school.
- Expand CTE-related outreach to reach all students, emphasizing that students who pursue a CTE pathway in high

school will be academically prepared to enroll in a four-year college upon high school graduation if they choose to do so and experience the added benefit of early career exploration.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Advance CTE's suite of CTE [communications tools](#)
- The Aspen Institute's [Messaging Dos and Don'ts](#)
- The Colorado Department of Education's [Career Conversation Starters](#)
- The Ohio Department of Education's [career pathways resources](#)
- Data Quality Campaign's "[Grace's Path to Success](#)" infographic
- Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce's [COVID-19 Unemployment and Job Losses tracker](#)
- Equitable Futures' [How to Talk About Social Capital](#)
- Gallup [poll data](#) on parents' desire for more postsecondary options