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EDUCATION SYSTEMS CENTER *at*
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Illinois College & Career Readiness Policy 101

September 2026

Welcome!

Please share your name, organization, and one thing you wish you knew as a high school senior before graduating.

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Agenda

1. Session Overview & Introductions
2. Illinois Policy Context
3. Key College & Career Readiness Levers
4. Q&A
5. Exit Slip



Our Vision

Clear, unambiguous paths to college and career opportunities that equip students for meaningful participation in the global economy.

Pillars of Work

- Policy: **Shaping systems for equitable college and career access**
- Practices: **Improving learner experiences and outcomes**
- Impact: **Driving systemic change through data and networks**

Areas of Practice

- College and career pathways
- Career-connected and work-based learning
- Transitional instruction
- Early college coursework
- Flexible learning
- Longitudinal data
- Collective impact networks

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Policy Agenda

Leadership, Governance, & Vision

How do leadership, governance, and vision shape what is possible through Illinois policy?

How can they be used to drive equitable outcomes for students?

Student Experience & Conditions

How do students experience and navigate the P-20 pipeline?

How are students faring overall, and how do they feel about it?

Evaluation & Continuous Improvement

Are policies driving the experiences and outcomes we intended?

Do we have adequate data resources to examine equity and capacity for continuous improvements?

Future Readiness

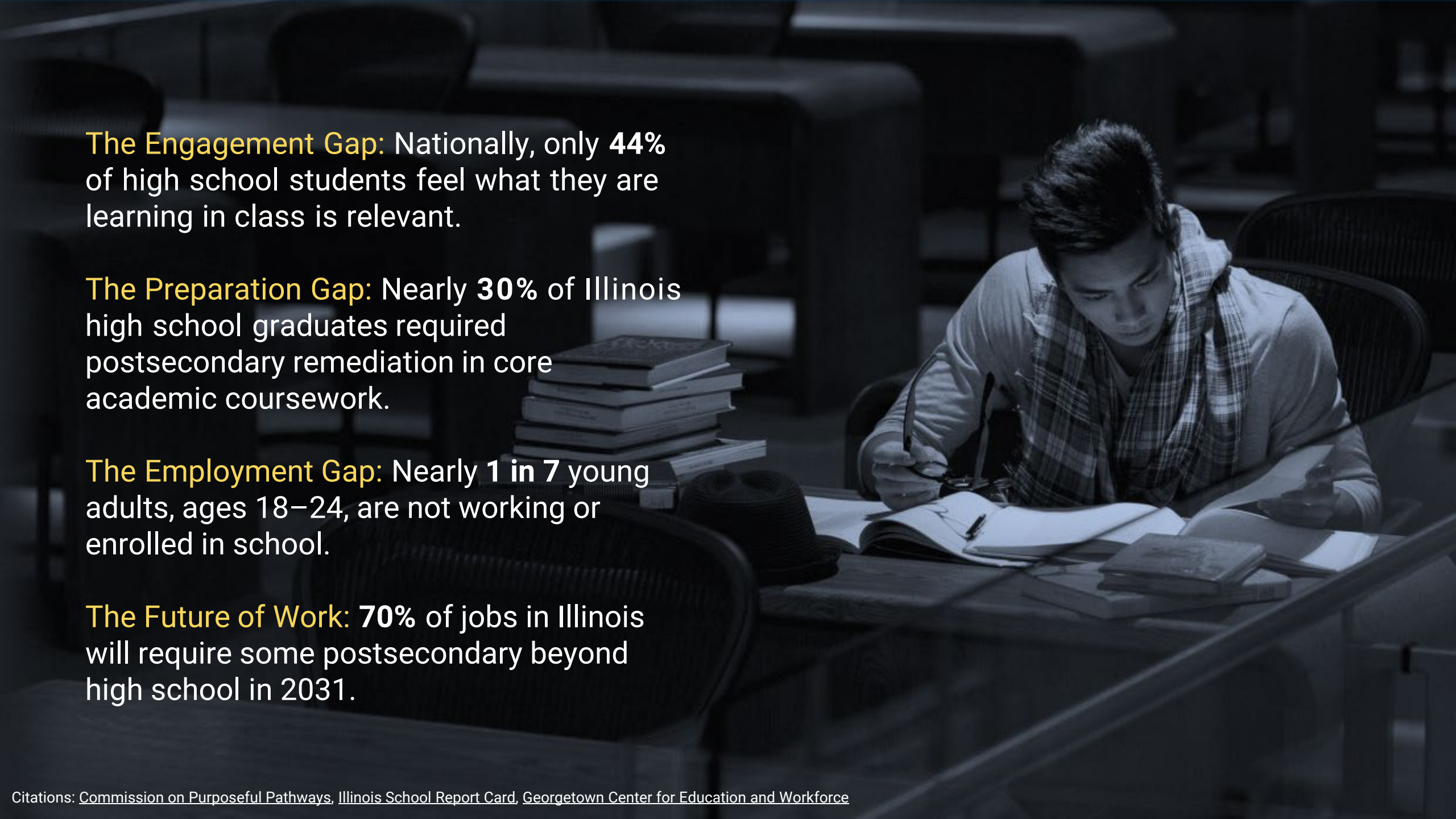
How do we anticipate changes to our world and systems?

How can we design policy to prepare students to adapt and thrive in evolving conditions?

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Context

How and why does Illinois focus on college and career readiness?



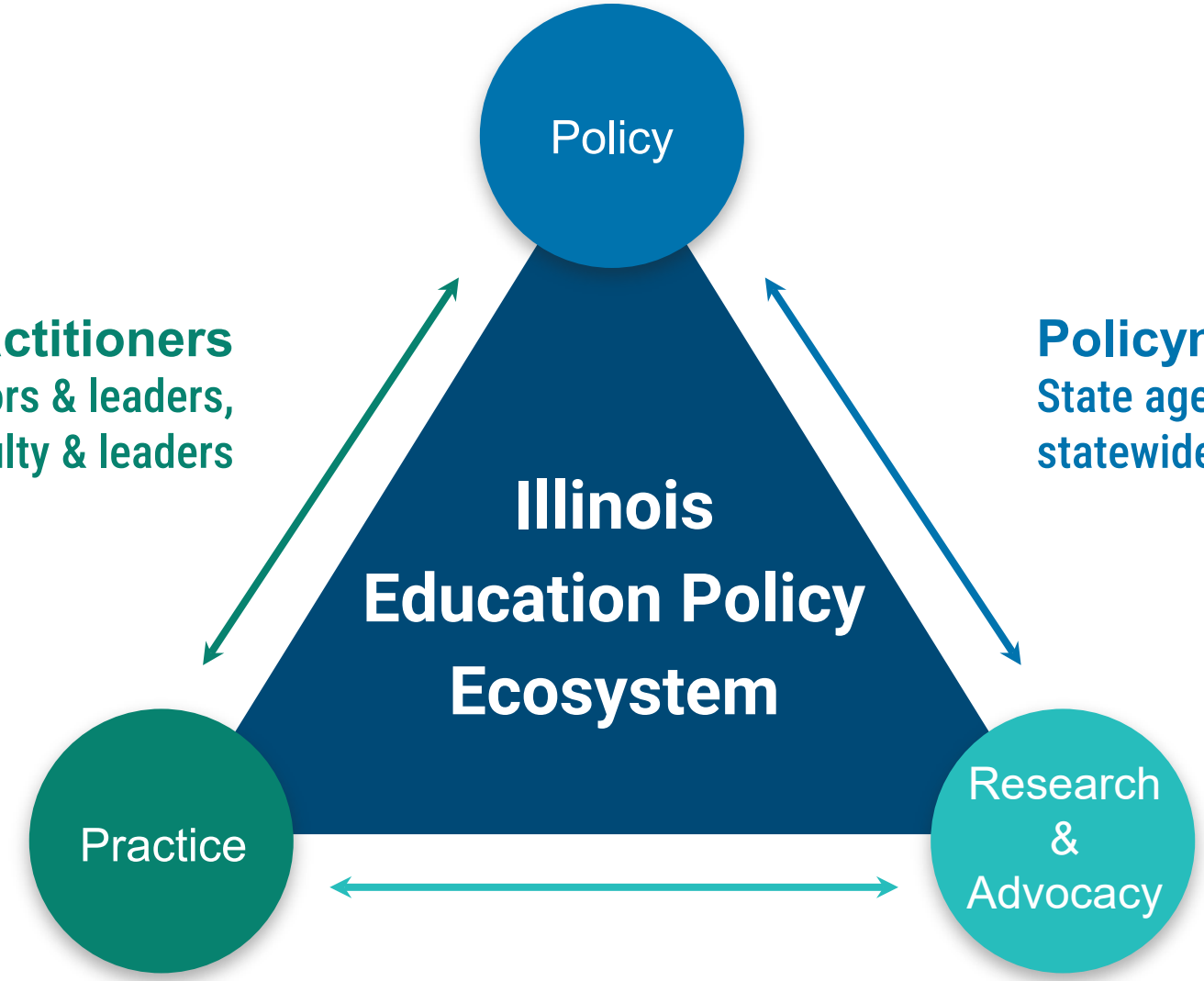
The Engagement Gap: Nationally, only **44%** of high school students feel what they are learning in class is relevant.

The Preparation Gap: Nearly **30%** of Illinois high school graduates required postsecondary remediation in core academic coursework.

The Employment Gap: Nearly **1 in 7** young adults, ages 18–24, are not working or enrolled in school.

The Future of Work: **70%** of jobs in Illinois will require some postsecondary beyond high school in 2031.

Citations: Commission on Purposeful Pathways, Illinois School Report Card, Georgetown Center for Education and Workforce



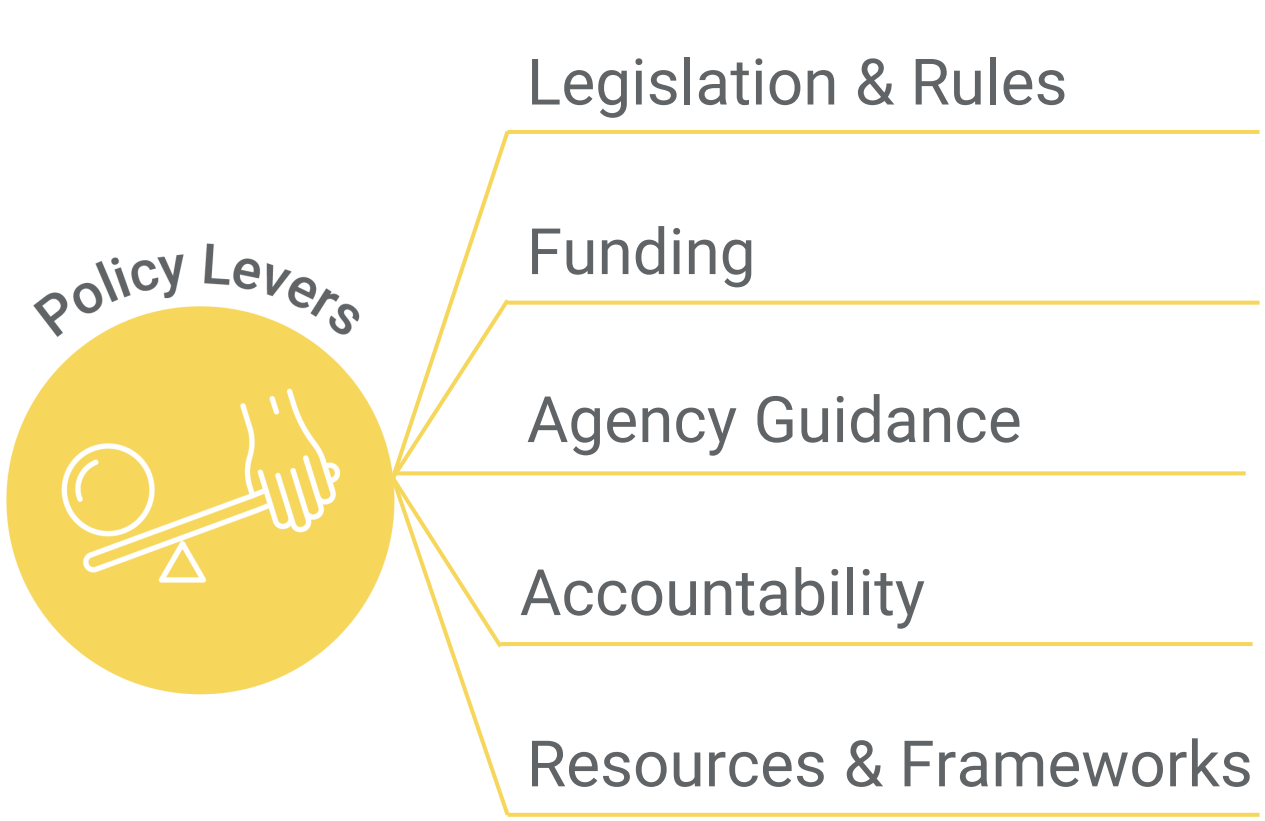
Practitioners
Secondary educators & leaders, postsecondary faculty & leaders

Policymakers
State agencies, legislators, statewide committees

Policy Influencers
Policy & advocacy groups, associations, national partners, researchers

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Building Blocks for Readiness





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What does this look like in practice?

Key Illinois college and career readiness policy

Key Policy Levers

Career & Technical Education (CTE)

Align high school and community college programs of study to local labor market needs.

Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) Act

Four student-centered, competency-based approaches to preparing students for college, career, and life.

Accelerated Placement + Dual Credit Quality Acts

Place students in the highest level of coursework they can handle + ensure dual credit is rigorous and transferable.

Workforce Pell

Expansion of federal need-based financial aid to cover short-term, high-quality career training programs, beginning July 1

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Illinois College and Career Pathway Models

Career Pathway	A combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that aligns both vertically and horizontally across secondary education, adult education, workforce training and development, career and technical education, and postsecondary education systems, pathways, and programs.
Program of Study	A coordinated, non-duplicative sequence of academic and technical content at the secondary and postsecondary level.
Career & Technical Education (CTE)	Career and Technical Education (CTE) prepares individuals for high-skill, high-wage, in-demand employment and provides learners with the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to thrive in college and careers. All students benefit from career-connected learning that emphasizes real-world skills within a selected career focus.
College and Career Pathway Endorsement	A College and Career Pathway Endorsement is awarded on Illinois high school diplomas/transcripts to simultaneously demonstrate students' readiness for postsecondary programs and entry-level professional learning experiences in a selected career interest area. (110 ILCS 148/ Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act)

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Career & Technical Education (CTE)



- Designated federal and state funding stream for providing instruction for careers in high-wage, high-skill, and in-demand occupations across career clusters
- Districts and area career centers (in collaboration with local employer and community college partners) develop Programs of Study including progressive course sequences, work-based learning, and early college credit opportunities
- High schools are authorized to substitute certain graduation requirements (e.g. laboratory science) with approved CTE courses
- Uses funding and accountability measures to spur implementation
- **50%** of Illinois high school students took at least one CTE course in SY2025

pwract.org

Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) Act

2016 Public Act 99-0674 (HB5729)

Components

- Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE)
- Scaling of 12th Grade Transitional Courses
- College and Career Pathway Endorsements (CCPE) on High School Diplomas
- Pilot of Competency-Based High School Graduation Requirements

Original Expectations

- Agencies develop PaCE and transitional instruction frameworks and resources
- Districts opt-in to implementation of PaCE, CCPE, and CBE
- Districts implement transitional math or opt-out

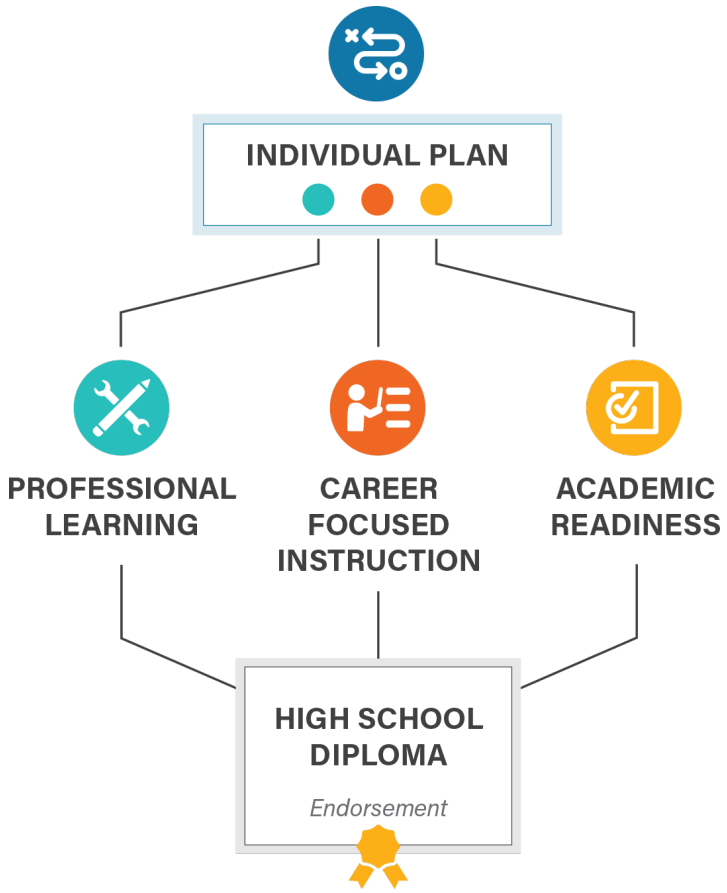


2022 Public Act 102-0917 (HB3296)

- Districts serving grades 6–12 must elect into or opt out of implementing PaCE by July 2025.
- Districts serving grades 9–12 must elect into or opt out of offering College & Career Pathway Endorsements by July 2025.
  - 1 endorsement for Class of 2027.
  - 2 endorsements for Class of 2029.
  - 3 endorsements for Class of 2031 (if school has >350 students in 9-12).

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College and Career Pathway Endorsements Framework





INDIVIDUAL PLAN

Each student completing an endorsement must have an individualized plan, which includes college planning linked to early understanding of career goals, financial aid, resume, and personal statement.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Awareness, exploration, and preparation activities that provide opportunities for students to interact with adults in their workplace and gain essential employability and technical competencies.

9th	10th	11th	12th
At least 2 career exploration activities or 1 intensive experience		60 cumulative hours of paid or for credit, supervised caree development experience(s) with a professional skills assessment r	
At least 2 team-based challenges with adult mentoring			

CAREER-FOCUSED INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

2 years of secondary coursework or equivalent that include essential employability and technical competencies, at least 6 hours of early college credit, and articulation to a postsecondary credential with labor market value.

9th	10th	11th	12th
Orientation / Introduction Courses			
	Skill Development Courses		
			Capstone / Advanced Courses

ACADEMIC READINESS

Ready for non-remedial coursework in reading and math by high school graduation through criteria defined by the school district and local community college.

What does the Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) framework include?

Middle School (6th–8th Grade)

Outlines what a student should be *exposed to* and what a student should be *supported to do* at the end of each grade level in three key domains:

- Aspiration
- Self-advocacy
- Planning



High School (9th–12th Grade)

Outlines what students should be *supported to do* and what they should *know* at the end of each grade in three key domains:

- Career exploration and development
- Postsecondary education exploration, preparation, and selection
- Financial aid and literacy

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Illinois PaCE Postsecondary and Career Expectations

At the middle school and early high school level, the Illinois Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) Framework is designed to provide students with guided exploration of postsecondary planning and options in a manner that is consistent with adolescent development. Meaningful participation in post-secondary preparation programs requires that students perceive college and/or career as possible and probable. Too often, programs are designed to serve only students who already have a college-going or career-oriented identity. The developmental work in the middle school framework is intended to prepare students to more fully engage with the PaCE Framework throughout the critical high school years.



By the end of 6th grade

A student should be exposed to:

- information about and examples of a wide range of careers
- language that emphasizes individual skills, strengths, and assets
- practices that develop a growth mindset

A student should be supported to:

- explore their interests
- practice their strengths
- develop their confidence in their abilities

By the end of 7th grade

A student should be supported to:

- engage in guided self-reflection
- articulate aspirations
- envision a positive future

- explore their habits
- create or change a habit
- record their progress
- explore career interests

- explore their strengths
- effectively ask for help
- understand a growth mind set

By the end of 8th grade

A student should be supported to:

- explore barriers to aspirations
- articulate personal strengths
- identify sources of motivation

- explore career interests
- develop an educational plan for at least one career interest
- compare possible financial futures
- complete a career cluster survey
- attend a career exploration day

- demonstrate a growth mind set
- explore learning styles
- map a support network
- complete a unit on education planning

A student should be exposed to:

- the concept of career clusters of interest
- relationship between community service/extracurricular activities and postsecondary (PS)/career goals
- be exposed to a financial literacy unit in a course or workshop

ISAC Illinois Student Assistance Commission

Illinois State Board of Education

ICCB Illinois Community College Board

IBHE Illinois Board of Higher Education

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Illinois PaCE

Postsecondary and Career Expectations

Each student should have an individualized learning plan to help make decisions about career and post-secondary (PS) education or training, to plan a course of study, and to make financial aid assessments with family members.



By the end of 9th grade

A student should be supported to:

- complete a career cluster survey
- complete a career interest survey
- attend a PS options workshop
- select course work for PS/career plans aligned with the ISBE College and Career Readiness Indicators
- enroll as appropriate in early college credit courses
- outline a plan for community service and extracurricular activities related to PS plans
- attend a basic financial aid presentation with a trusted adult

A student should know:

- one or two careers for further exploration
- the relationship between HS coursework, attendance, and grades to PS plans
- importance of community service and extracurricular activities to PS and career plans
- general cost ranges of various PS options

By the end of 10th grade

A student should be supported to:

- visit at least one workplace aligned with career interests
- participate in activities related to their career cluster of interest
- select a career area of interest: enroll in career pathway (CP) as available
- explore opportunities along the Work Based Learning Continuum.
- connect and build relationships with 2-3 adults to support the PS and career selection process
- review coursework, and PS/career plans in relation to the ISBE College and Career Readiness Indicators (every year)
- attend a basic financial aid presentation with a family member

A student should know:

- educational requirements, cost, expected entry level, and midpoint salary for occupations in selected CP
- skills related to career interests
- different types of PS credentials and institutions
- general timing of PS entrance exams and applications
- benefit of early college credit opportunities to PS access and completion

By the end of 11th grade

A student should be supported to:

- revisit the career interest survey
- participate in a mock job interview
- create a resume and personal statement
- complete an experience within the Work Based Learning Continuum.
- determine readiness for college-level coursework in math/ELA and enrollment in either "catch up" or "speed up" course
- complete at least one early college credit opportunity
- attend a college fair
- visit at least 3 PS institutions
- take at least one college entrance exam
- complete a Postsecondary Plan Workshop

A student should know:

- application deadlines, test timing, cost, and preparation for industry-based certification for CP
- entrance requirements, including application deadlines, for expected PS programs of study
- 3-5 match schools, one safety, one reach school for PS program of study
- negative impact of remediation on PS goals
- financial aid deadlines for chosen PS options

By the end of 12th grade

By the end of 12th grade a student should be supported to:

- complete at least two team based challenges.
- obtain an internship opportunity related to the CP if applicable
- if applicable, receive industry-based certification(s) related to the CP
- address any remedial needs in math/ELA
- complete a financial aid offer workshop

A student should know:

- how CP courses and experiences articulate to degree programs at PS options
- estimated cost of chosen PS options
- affordability of PS options in relation to expected entry-level career salary and anticipated debt
- terms and conditions of any scholarship or loan

By 12/31 of 12th grade a student should have:

- completed 3 or more admissions applications to PS institutions
- ensure all steps in the PS admissions process are completed on time
- attended a Financial Aid Application completion workshop
- completed a financial aid application

ISAC

Illinois Student Assistance Commission

Illinois State Board of Education

ICCB

IBHE

ILLINOIS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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What is Transitional Instruction?

College students in remedial courses have substantially lower advancement, credit accumulation, and graduation outcomes.

- Transitional instruction courses in math and English are designed for 12th-graders who do not yet meet college-readiness benchmarks.
- Courses provide foundational knowledge and skills and use content relevant to the student's college or career path. Focus on growth mindset, resilience, perseverance, 21st-century skills, and college readiness.
- A passing grade guarantees placement into college-level English or math at all Illinois community colleges and participating universities.



https://transitionalinstruction.org/

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Why Dual Credit?



Student Benefits

- Allows students to prove to others and themselves that they can succeed in college.
- College costs can be reduced.
- Time to degree can be shortened.
- Substantially higher community college graduation rates and advancement rates.

Postsecondary Institution Benefits

- The enhanced high school and college faculty dialogue can help better align secondary and postsecondary education.
- Positive implications for credential/degree attainment.
- Can be a strategy to recruit and engage future students.

ICCB Dual Credit Report, March 2025

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Dual Credit Quality Act (DCQA)

Overview

Illinois' DCQA codifies minimum requirements:

- What secondary and postsecondary partners need to do to establish quality dual credit.
- Expectations around ensuring adequate access to different student groups (including students with disabilities).
- Communication of opportunities to stakeholders including students and educators.
- Created the Model Partnership Agreement* to center students and guide local leaders in their partnership development.

June 2025 Amendment

- Prioritizes local partnerships over non-local or out-of-state providers.
- Establishes a ceiling for teacher credentialing requirements.
- Sets a firm timeline and process for districts and community colleges to commence negotiations.
- Creates a process for districts to appeal their partner college's decision to decline a course.
- Creates a Dual Credit Committee composed of state agency, secondary, and postsecondary representatives, meeting at least annually to improve dual credit accessibility, quality, and alignment to meet the needs of students.

*The Model Partnership Agreement is currently being updated to reflect the latest dual credit policy context.

DCQA: Model Partnership Agreement

Purpose

The MPA works to address the realities that:

- All 48 community college districts offer dual credit, but type and quantity varies.
- Lack of consistency in how colleges and districts partner.

>> Download the MPA form, exhibits, & FAQ

Note: The MPA will be updated soon to reflect the amended DCQA. Under the amended DCQA, the MPA remains a resource, but does not serve as default agreement.

Emphasizing Strategic Dual Credit

"Priority Course" means any course within the Illinois Articulation Initiative General Education Core Curriculum, or any Priority Career Pathway Course.

"Priority Career Pathway Course" means a career-focused course that has been identified by the District, after consultation with the College, in its submission to ISBE as an early college credit course within a career-focused instructional sequence as part of a College and Career Pathway Endorsement system under the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act (110 ILCS 148/1 et seq.).

Automatic Acceleration

Passed in March 2021, Article 65 of Public Act 101-0654 requires high school districts to **ensure accelerated placement policies facilitate automatic student placement** into the next most rigorous course offered.

- Applies for English, social studies/humanities, math, and science
- Can include early college credit courses (dual credit, AP, IB, some CTE)

Automatic enrollment can support **equitable access** to early college courses, ensuring every student, regardless of background, has access to the best-fit and most rigorous course for their skill levels.



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Workforce Pell

Illinois' Goal: To maximize student access to high-quality short-term workforce programs and expanded financial aid, while maintaining consumer protections.

- Expands federal Pell Grant rules to allow eligible students to use funding for **high-quality, short-term workforce programs** aligned with in-demand occupations beginning July 1, 2026
  - Focuses on programs linked to an Eligible Occupations List
  - May ultimately apply to some programs that are accessible to younger learners
  - **Funds follow students** to programs – an expansion of postsecondary affordability
- Process:
  - Institutions apply for state approval, reviewed by Illinois state agencies, Illinois Workforce Innovation Board, and the Governor
  - Illinois submits state-approved programs to US Department of Education for federal approval



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Emerging: New Statewide Postsecondary Attainment Goal

- Executive Order 3 (March 2026): Establishes an interagency working group to develop and recommend a new statewide postsecondary attainment goal for 2040 that both focuses on credentials of value and promotes economic mobility for Illinoisans. Due December 1, 2026.

- Establishes a State Attainment Working Group comprised of education and workforce agencies and advisory from other state agencies
  - Co-Chairs: Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), and the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES)
- Work includes: reviewing data and existing state plans, engaging stakeholders, and ensuring alignment to existing initiatives

ATTAINMENT GOAL

A **North Star** that establishes a consistent vision on the horizon

CREDENTIALS OF VALUE

Identifies high-priority credentials and is updated regularly to account for evolving labor market needs. Can drive completion goals for institutions.

REGIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Establish priorities and opportunities by region

LEARNER EXPERIENCE

Acknowledge variation in student experience and backgrounds, and design systems that meet the needs of modern learners.



A CLEAR VISION. CONNECTED ACTION.

Illinois's attainment goal guides all decisions and keeps us focused on the future.

Illinois focuses on credentials that lead to meaningful outcomes and update as needs evolve.

Illinois aligns strategies to regional strengths, needs, and opportunities.

Illinois designs flexible, equitable systems that meet learners where they are.

Setting the Vision



Questions?

Select Resources

- Postsecondary & Workforce Readiness (PWR) Act:
  - General Website
  - Transitional Instruction Website
  - College and Career Pathway Endorsements (CCPE):
    - ISBE CCPE Website
    - EdSystems CCPE Orientation & Overview
  - ISAC Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) Framework
- Career and Technical Education (CTE)
  - ISBE CTE Website
  - Illinois Model Programs of Study Guides
- Work-Based Learning
  - Illinois Work-Based Learning Innovation Network (I-WIN) Resource Hub
  - Career Development Experience Toolkit
  - ISBE Work-Based Learning Manual
  - High-Quality Work-Based Learning Fundamentals Webinar Recording
- Dual Credit
  - ICCB Dual Credit Website
  - ISBE Dual Credit Endorsements
  - Illinois Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships
- Illinois Career Pathways Dictionary

Stay Engaged!

1. Exit Slip

2. Complete our High School Graduation Requirements Survey by September 30

3. Attend the Illinois Education and Career Success Network Annual Conference on March 2, 2027

4. Join the Success Network Policy Committee to stay up-to-date!

Thank you!



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