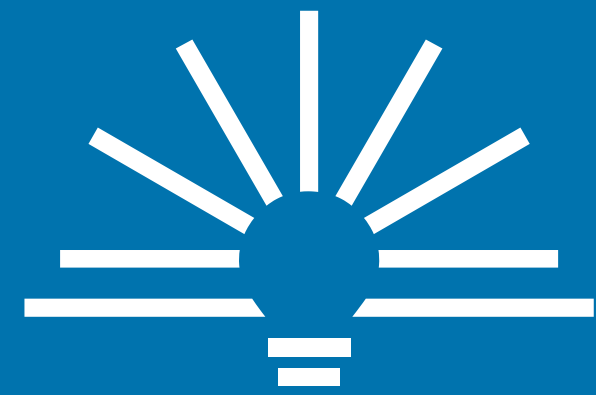


# Policy Agenda

JANUARY 2025





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# Background & Approach

CENTERING EQUITY IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

# Background

Since 2012, Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University (EdSystems) has worked with policymakers and practitioners across Illinois to help create a world where students have clear, unambiguous paths to college and career opportunities that equip them for meaningful participation in the global economy. Our work centers on systems-level changes to ensure equity for historically marginalized students, both at statewide and local levels. We take a bi-directional approach at EdSystems: working at the state level to create ecosystem and policy change while simultaneously working at the local level to create organizational change. This allows us to align local efforts to state policy while elevating local experiences and learnings to state tables—a unique aspect of our work.

# Approach

## Working to improve college and career readiness and success

In Illinois, work to improve college and career readiness and success for students has resulted in notable progress in practice and student outcomes, including increasing rates of early college credit course participation and decreasing rates of postsecondary remediation. These data are promising signals that more students are completing high school prepared for postsecondary education. However, they are attenuated by other data points that show more limited improvements or slower recovery post-pandemic, particularly in high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment. Further, student demography, geography, and resources correlate too strongly to education and career outcomes, signaling a continued challenge in ensuring equity as a clear focus for our systems.

To that end, EdSystems is setting forth a policy agenda to guide our work in the next three to five years. This agenda is informed by the challenges we have encountered while

working with policymakers and practitioners and the conditions we seek to create alongside our local, statewide, and national partners. We began this work by reflecting on the challenges our team has identified by engaging with the field and with quantitative and qualitative data. These challenges are wide-ranging, occurring locally, regionally, and/or statewide. We organized the challenges into the four thematic areas: leadership, governance, and vision; student experiences and conditions; policy evaluation and continuous improvement; and future readiness.

For each challenge, we then identified policy aims that describe the conditions we aspire to and practices to drive college and career success for students, particularly those who come from historically marginalized communities. The highlighted levers are not meant to be reflective of the full universe of potential strategies, but rather highlight a handful of bold policy choices that could drive change.

# Core Challenges

## Policy Agenda Themes

### Leadership, Governance, & Vision

As fundamental components of policy development and implementation, how do leadership, governance, and vision shape what is achievable in Illinois?

How can these components drive equitable outcomes for students?

### Policy Evaluation & Continuous Improvement

Are our policies driving the types of experiences and outcomes we intended?

Do we have adequate data resources to examine equity in our systems, and do we have the capacity to use those data to drive continuous improvement processes?

### Student Experience & Conditions

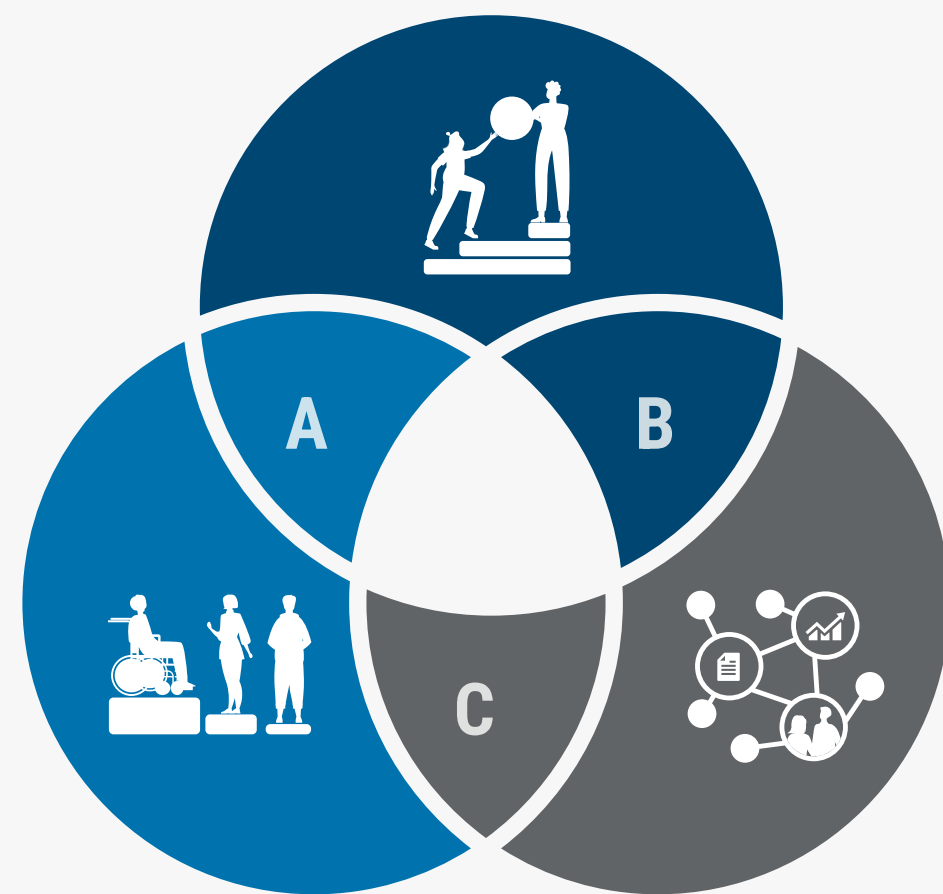
How do students experience and navigate the preschool through college and career (i.e., P-20) pipeline?

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

### Future Readiness

How do we anticipate the realities and challenges that will shape our world and systems in the future?

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



## Cross-Cutting Principles for Equitable Systems

Animating our policy aims are three cross-cutting policy principles:

- (A)** In equitable systems, student demography, geography, and resources do not correlate with access and outcomes.
- (B)** We strive to shift the burden of advancing along educational pathways to the system itself and away from students and their families.
- (C)** Our systems should be designed collaboratively and grounded in quantitative and qualitative data, including student voice.

## National Context

As we enter into a new federal administration with changing priorities in education, at a state level is essential to shore up effective policy and practices in service of student success. Illinois state leaders hold much power in shaping systems and student experiences and can take action to protect the progress we have made in advancing equitable solutions to long-standing challenges. Although there may be changing federal priorities and funding for strategies serving different populations (e.g., students with disabilities or other marginalized communities), strategies such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) enjoy bi-partisan support, and we will work to identify opportunities to leverage that support in service of student success in Illinois.

## Our Commitment

We will advance our cross-cutting principles and policy aims through EdSystems' bi-directional approach of supporting both policy and programs at the state and local levels.

- We will work with statewide leaders to learn from local exemplars and create the policy conditions that will enable local communities to serve their students innovatively and equitably.
- We will continue to support communities to make the most of the policy windows that are available to them.

We must create the conditions that will enable all learners, regardless of their background and resources, to advance along clear and unambiguous paths college and career opportunities and success. Our policies and practices need to foster a P-20 system that is aligned, navigable, and produces equitable outcomes by design.

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# Leadership, Governance, & Vision

AIMS FOR A STATEWIDE VISION, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES, AND CAPACITY AND STAFFING



# Challenges

*While many challenges are evident in discrete areas of policy and practice, there are broader inconsistencies in statewide vision, roles and responsibilities, and capacity and staffing.*

## Lack of Shared Vision

**Illinois lacks a shared vision to equitably drive cross-system initiatives for college and career readiness and success.** For many years, Illinois' postsecondary attainment goal of 60% of adults having a high-quality degree or credential by 2025 motivated policymakers and practitioners throughout the P-20 pipeline, though it lacked concrete equity targets. As we reach the target year, state leaders have not yet developed a new, equity-driven vision that will illuminate how statewide and local leaders can work to advance economic mobility for Illinoisans regardless of their background. Without a shared vision and a robust state-level ecosystem to hold and advance that vision across agencies and throughout the P-20 pipeline, we see frequent misalignment across secondary, postsecondary, and workforce systems. That structural misalignment is further exacerbated by underlying cultural and relational differences across those driving the system forward.

## Gaps in the P-20 Pipeline

**Local and statewide leaders\* have inconsistently defined and prioritized roles and responsibilities in inter-organizational and transitional spaces throughout the P-20 ecosystem, resulting in a leaky pipeline for learners.** Illinois' P-20 governance structures are multilayered and geographically overlapping, though leaders and practitioners often operate in silos driven by discrete funding and accountability mechanisms. This can result in misalignment of student experiences leading to students falling out at critical transitional junctures, such as the secondary-to-postsecondary transition. Even when policy defines roles and expectations, regions prioritize these in varying ways based on local conditions, perceptions of what will make their systems work, and the existence (or lack thereof) of designated funding to facilitate coordination across systems.

\* Including, but not limited to, state agencies, secondary/postsecondary institutions, Regional Offices of Education, Education For Employment regions, etc.

## A Stressed Workforce

**Staff turnover and personnel capacity limitations in critical areas further exacerbate the ability of leaders to implement policy with fidelity in service of equitable outcomes.** For example, broader educator pipeline challenges are particularly acute for qualified instructors for strategic dual credit courses that will open the most doors for students at the postsecondary level. Further, approval processes can create an administrative burden for local leaders working to develop and implement required programming, such as the College and Career Pathway Endorsement, with little to no designated funding for capacity. At the statewide level, agency leaders must grapple with evolving priorities from their leadership and the broader administration, which can lead them to divert from long-range projects.

“For colleges and high schools, there is a huge disconnect in policy and expectations between secondary and postsecondary.”

– Postsecondary Dual Credit Coordinator

“We don't offer very many [dual credit courses], and when you do sign up for some, they don't have the teachers to teach the classes.”

– High School Student

“Maybe an incentive for current teachers to attain a masters degree in a particular dual credit field would facilitate increasing dual credit opportunities.”

– Postsecondary Faculty



# Aims

Illinois education and workforce leaders hold a clear, shared vision for equitable economic mobility that drives increased learner access, retention, and success throughout the P-20 pipeline.

A coordinated ecosystem of state and local education and workforce leaders collaborate to develop, implement, and evaluate college and career readiness policy that includes clear and consistent codification of roles and funding to support intermediary functions.

# Levers



## Governor's Education Cabinet

Support the Office of the Governor in establishing a "Governor's Education Cabinet" to explore and develop recommendations for inter-agency and transitional spaces. This table of champions and leaders from state and local levels (not limited to agency leadership) could leverage committee structures to explore discrete focus areas, such as the transition between secondary and postsecondary education.



## Statewide Vision for Economic Mobility

The Governor's Education Cabinet could be tasked with developing a new shared vision\*\* for economic mobility† that is data-informed and goes beyond postsecondary attainment and to mobilize an alignment of leaders and champions throughout the P-20 system. It requires creating a vision and developing a devoted table of champions to ensure that vision is realized in collaboration with other emerging systems leaders such as the envisioned Chief Workforce Officer.



## Funding for Intermediaries & Collaboration

As practitioners and policymakers acknowledge, "what gets funded gets done." We must explore new ways to leverage existing resources and funding streams to incentivize and support staffing and policy implementation that bridges different components of our education and workforce systems.

\*\* A group of leading education organizations have recently published *Illinois Vision 2030*, which "provides a blueprint to enhance public education through future-focused learning with shared accountability and predictable funding." While *Vision 2030* outlines a number of relevant principles, the goal of a broader statewide vision would be to help organize the broader P-20 and workforce pipeline in addition to K-12.

† "Economic mobility" meaning the ability of Illinoisans to improve their economic status over time through education, training, and employment.

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# Student Experience & Conditions

AIMS FOR EQUITABLE STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND ALIGNED AND STREAMLINED SYSTEMS



# Challenges

*To ensure Illinois learners, particularly those from historically marginalized populations, benefit from systems and practices, we must acknowledge and address the broader contexts, placement policies, information and gatekeeping practices, and competing demands that shape learners' access and outcomes.*

## Influence of Broader Context

**Systems and forces beyond education shape student access to college and career readiness opportunities and their education and workforce outcomes.** While the education system is not always positioned to address underlying causes of barriers such as poverty, geography, and trauma, practitioners and policymakers must still acknowledge and grapple with the impact those broader challenges have on learner experiences. Without addressing learners' contexts, our systems will likely reinforce existing barriers and continue to result in inequitable outcomes.

## Inequitable Placement

**Inconsistent policies and practices for placing students in college and career readiness opportunities exacerbate inequities shaped by student demography, geography, and resources.** Experiences such as dual credit, transitional instruction, and work-based learning are all subject to locally defined placement policies and practices that are only somewhat shaped by statewide policy and guidance. While these opportunities are scaling, student placement often depends on measures (e.g., multiple vs. individual measures, prior coursework, etc.) and cut scores (e.g., GPA, standardized tests, etc.). Variances in both contribute to confusion and inconsistencies in student access that results in students missing out on potentially valuable opportunities. Intentional work to improve access is needed to close existing equity gaps in student participation and outcomes.

## A Culture of Gatekeeping

**Student perceptions and choices around educational opportunities are shaped by access to quality, timely information, the broader school and community culture, and their experiences with adults who function as gatekeepers.** Leaders often misdiagnose a lack of student participation in experiences such as dual credit or pathways as a lack of information. However, students across several contexts have shared that, while they sometimes lack awareness, their decisions are often more deeply shaped by adults serving as gatekeepers, steering them into or out of potentially valuable experiences. Students and families make rational choices based on what information they have – both about the opportunities available and their perceptions of whether those opportunities are truly for them.

## Scheduling Challenges

**Scheduling challenges inhibit district implementation of college and career readiness opportunities and student participation.** While both school leaders and students desire a broad range of opportunities to learn and grow, offerings are limited by a growing list of graduation requirements, coupled with resource and capacity constraints. For students, opportunities such as work-based learning can be a scheduling challenge, particularly during junior and senior years. Ultimately, this means the college and career preparation we believe will help students succeed may not always be reaching the students we care about.

The Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative's "[Dual Credit in Illinois](#)" report (November 2023) found:

1. Participation in dual credit increased, but statewide gaps widened for Black/Latinx students and low-income students.
2. Within districts, growth in participation was uneven by student demography.

# Aims

All Illinois learners are provided adequate resources, advising, and support to ensure they are prepared for and accelerated into college and career opportunities aligned to their interests and growing skills.

Illinois secondary and postsecondary systems utilize clear, equitable, evidence-based, and aligned placement policies and practices that maximize student acceleration throughout the education pipeline.

# Levers



## Funding a Learner-Ready System

Change requires centering student needs to design a learner-ready system that makes navigating and experiencing education clearer and more seamless for them. Examples include systemic investment in student support and educator professional development opportunities to ensure students have equitable access to strategic dual credit.



## Increasing Portability of Pathway Experiences

It is essential to holistically examine graduation requirements and postsecondary expectations to ensure that students can participate in a broad range of experiences that gain them access to and acceleration through a postsecondary pathway. This could include portability of credit for a broad range of pathways experiences, such as earning the College and Career Pathway Endorsement.



## Creating Seamless College Admissions

Aligning expectations such as FAFSA completion (which is required for high school graduation) to more streamlined postsecondary admissions will ensure that more students remain in our systems and progress through degree completion.

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# Policy Evaluation & Continuous Improvement

AIMS FOR ASSESSING AND CONTINUOUSLY  
IMPROVING STATE AND LOCAL INITIATIVES



# Challenges

*Although Illinois has a range of innovative and thoughtful college and career readiness policies, our systems are broadly impacted by a lack of consistent evaluation, limitations to data access and utilization, and an uneven practice of putting equity principles into action.*

## Lack of Evaluation

**We do not yet know if the college and career readiness policy levers we have implemented are functioning in the intended way and having the desired impact on equity and outcomes.** While we can often measure the implementation of opportunities like pathways and participation of students at a high level, we need a more comprehensive evaluation of discrete interventions to measure the relationship between policies, investments, implementation, and student outcomes. Without such analyses, we cannot derive insights to shape continuous improvement processes and optimize our systems for equitable student success.

## Data Access Gaps

**Illinois lacks consistent, quality, and actionable implementation, participation, and outcome data both statewide and locally.** Illinois has several publicly available education and workforce data resources,<sup>‡</sup> but often, those are broad, summary data lacking the qualitative and quantitative information needed to illuminate how processes and requirements play out in practice. State and local leaders have a strong appetite for longitudinal data but are limited to pulling together discrete data points as a proxy. Further, data collection processes vary across districts and institutions, and flexible data requirements from state agencies can mean that the data collected are internally inconsistent. To understand how policies and practices impact students, data need to be consistent, clear, and readily integrated across various touchpoints.

<sup>‡</sup> These resources include, but are not limited to, the [Illinois Report Card](#) (the state's official source for information about public schools across Illinois), [Illinois Postsecondary Profiles](#) (includes a range of postsecondary data from multiple agencies with distinct views for different users), and the [Illinois Education & Career Success Network Dashboard](#) (visualizes Illinois Report Card data and enables users to view, compare, and download across different geographies).

## Underutilization of Data

**State leaders and community partners underutilize implementation, participation, and outcome data to inform policy change and local practice.** Even where data are available, practices around engaging with data vary widely across and within agencies and communities. Certain practitioners might use data while others do not know where to find or how to utilize their data to advance college and career readiness. Utilizing data to improve student outcomes requires cultural shifts in state and local organizations and a commitment to taking action based on those data.

## Underequipped for Equity

**Significant gaps remain between shared P-20 goals and local and statewide action, as leaders are unevenly equipped to operationalize equity in policy and practice.** While many leaders across Illinois are motivated to drive more equitable access and outcomes for learners, they often share that it is difficult to understand how to make changes within existing systems that will fundamentally shift those outcomes. Leaders need skills, tools, and support to dismantle systemic barriers to equity.

In 2024, 2,422 students earned a College and Career Pathway Endorsement, up from 1,072 students in 2023.

“While CCPE student participation data is available by district and endorsement area, no demographic information is included. We are hearing concerns from district leaders that historically marginalized students are not earning endorsements at the same rate as their peers.”  
— EdSystems Pathways Director

# Aims

Illinois' education and workforce agencies hold a shared and funded research agenda and governance structure to systematically examine the efficacy and equity of statewide policies and programs.

Community and state leaders systematically engage with quantitative and qualitative data to understand student experiences and implement continuous improvement processes to enhance equitable student access and outcomes.

# Levers



## Community-Informed State Research Agenda

Dedicated work with communities across the state is needed to understand data needs and help inform a shared research agenda that can be ultimately driven by our state leaders.



## State Funding and Governance for Integrating Data

Illinois will need to devote consistent, dedicated funding and staffing to support interagency data integration and governance, including within participating state agencies.



## Policy Evaluation

The state could advance essential evaluations, such as of the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) Act, to understand how implementation is proceeding and examine equity implications of current implementation, scaling, and student participation. As the state continues to ramp up requirements for communities, it must prove how those strategies benefit students, including in terms of their long-term economic mobility, and ensure that approval processes are clear and achievable for local leaders.

PILLAR

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# Future Readiness

AIMS FOR ENSURING STUDENTS AND SYSTEMS  
ARE READY FOR CHANGING CONDITIONS





# Challenges

*As we design education and workforce policies and programs, we must account for evolving workforce and workplace conditions, including technological shifts and their impact on careers.*

## Evolving Job Markets

**The future of work is ever-evolving and challenging to predict, and existing education systems are tied to more rigid and outdated understandings of what current students will navigate in the job market.** Education and workforce systems have historically been designed in silos and are often tied to largely lagging indicators that do not always reflect the world that students will experience when they finish their educational journey. The rigidity with which our systems were designed means that students are being prepared using often outdated information and approaches. This can limit learners' opportunities to develop adaptability and the essential and technical skills that will meet future workforce needs. This gap furthers broader national debates over the value of postsecondary education and leads to students dropping out of educational programming without adequate preparation to access in-demand, living wage employment.

## Emerging Technologies

**Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, evolve quickly and shape how learners access, participate in, and learn through education and career programming.** State and local leaders often share that rapid technological change leads to them playing "catch up" in understanding how it will show up in their systems and with the learners they educate. Ultimately, this results in fear about technology use, a broad range of policies and practices, and widening equity gaps where historically marginalized populations are often the last to be brought into new technologies.

*"At the current rate of change, we need outside support to better understand how education can best utilize new technologies including AI. No matter what, we need to continue emphasizing essential skills. The skills haven't changed over time, we just call them something different now. Essential skills will always be critical in preparing students for life after high school."  
– EFE Director*

# Aims

All Illinois learners are equipped with essential and technical employability skills that empower them to be adaptive and prepared for a range of future employment opportunities.

Community and state leaders leverage emerging technologies to enhance access to and success in college and career preparation for all learners, particularly those from historically marginalized communities.

# Levers



## Proactive Research and Guidance

To cultivate the value proposition for students and families and ensure our education systems deliver on their promise, a dedicated committee of the Governor's Education Cabinet could lead efforts to proactively research and develop guidance for integrating new technologies into educational infrastructure and pedagogy. This guidance would shape how policymakers and practitioners leverage new technologies to enhance learning and mitigate, rather than exacerbate, equity gaps in access and success throughout the P-20 system.



## Supporting Interdisciplinary, Skills-Based Models

Policymakers need to ensure pathways policies and programs reflect the interdisciplinary, skills-based needs and social capital dimensions of the job market to enable economic mobility for learners. This could include considering how to further incentivize student participation in a robust continuum of work-based learning and reflect the impact that it can have on a learner's trajectory. This could include funding, accountability, and GPA-based mechanisms in which work-based learning is acknowledged as a core, baseline expectation of all student experiences.