



## Career pathways in the First State



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In the last decade, Delaware's once very stable economy felt some seismic shifts. The General Motors and Chrysler plants closed, causing the loss of thousands of blue-collar jobs. Dupont, a major employer in Delaware for centuries, was going through a massive merger with Dow Chemical. Couple these shifts with sweeping digital transformations in the banking industry, another staple of our economy, and it was clear: Our once robust economy was now fragile. On top of which, our K-12 system was largely evolving in its own silo, unconnected with these shifts in Delaware's "real world." There was a growing gap between what our economy needed and what our kids were able to do.

Fast forward to 2018. All across our small state, young people's vision of the future is becoming a lot clearer. They're exploring their passions and matching them to potential careers with the help of a network of expert adults. They have far crisper answers to the "what do you want to be when you

grow up?" question. And they're learning more and more each day just what steps they need to take to reach their dreams.

In a few short years, Delaware Pathways has begun to transform the education landscape here. Delaware aims to enroll 20,000 students in career pathways by 2020. That would be about half of our high school students. The public and private sector leaders engaged in this work feel good about our collective chances of reaching that goal.

If we're successful, this would not just be an interesting addition to the existing system; it could fundamentally *redesign* it.

I'll come back to these future possibilities, but first let me explain what Delaware Pathways looks like today and why it's grown so fast.

**Pathways Basics.** Pathways expands on the runway that our vo-tech schools built to help a broader range of students, especially traditionally underserved students, gain the knowledge and skills needed in Delaware's high-demand occupations. But because the economic landscape is changing so fast, and because the talent gaps are so large, this work has evolved and expanded to almost all of our comprehensive school districts and charter high schools. So this is not just for students in our vocational schools, this is now for all students, including those in a traditional "college prep" path.

Career pathways match students' interests with tailored instruction and relevant work-based learning experiences, and award industry-recognized credentials and college credits while students are still in high school. The program connects the K-12 system to higher education, local employers, and community partners, and it does so with particular emphasis on growing industries like finance, health care, information technology, and advanced manufacturing.

From the first pathway of twenty-seven students in advanced manufacturing in 2014, there are now fourteen pathways serving over 9,000 students in the fields mentioned above, along with many more, like computer science and teaching.

A unique feature of Delaware's approach to this work is that our statewide work-based learning intermediary is our one community college system, Delaware Technical Community College. They were a natural choice in that DTCC has campuses in each of our three counties and they already partner with many of our schools on dual enrollment and with many of our employers on job training. Another feature of Delaware's public policy environment that strengthens our pathways work is that the state has two scholarship programs that provide students who leave high school with a GPA of 2.5



or better with two years of free or significantly reduced tuition at Delaware Tech, Delaware State University, or the University of Delaware's Associate in Arts program.

**The value proposition.** Pathways grew fast in Delaware because of the point I made earlier: The value proposition made sense, and we were facing a crisis. For decades, we've seen initiatives that made sense to "reformers" and the private sector, but not so much to practitioners. And other ideas that seemed to resonate with those in the trenches didn't with those who held the resources and political power to make them happen at scale. But this career pathways idea resonates with a large swath of folks both inside and outside our schools.

Moreover, this will help all students identify the education and career options in their field of study, including those on the traditional "college track." Upwards of 65 percent of the jobs in Delaware are going to require some level of education beyond high school. Some young people will earn industry-recognized credentials and be prepared to enter their profession right out of high school. Others will continue their education through certification programs, associate or bachelor's degrees, or more.

These pathways are meant to provide on and off ramps for the full spectrum of options. A young person on a healthcare pathway could use it to decide: a) to become a certified nursing assistant so she can start earning some money while she weighs her options; b) to start working towards becoming a medical doctor; or c) that it isn't the right field. All are good choices. Parents and students are savvy, they know the cost of college, and they know that the workplace is less forgiving, so we're already hearing that this value proposition resonates. Whatever field a young person wants to pursue, getting a feel for what that work might entail and building up people-skills while still in high school just makes sense.

**The Drivers.** Good ideas are often borne of necessity. In Delaware, three vectors—business, home, and school—aligned to create a perfect storm.

To my earlier point, our private sector and political leaders saw major shifts occurring in our economy. Though Delaware still boasts a triple-A bond rating and once had more Ph.D.s per capita than any state in the nation, the big changes underway simultaneously in both our blue- and white-collar sectors were a major cause for concern. Like much of the country, we were being hit with the one-two punch of automation and globalization.

There was a clear mismatch between the changing economy and the skills that our students were developing in high school. Employers were increasingly seeking to hire candidates with not only technical skills, but also strong soft skills like communication, problem solving, and teamwork. Thousands of jobs across the state were available yet out of reach for many Delawareans.

Our schools felt it, too. Despite our efforts to move the academic needle via some serious (and, in my view, very helpful) infrastructure funding from Race to the Top (\$119 million) and the Early Learning Challenge Grant (\$49 million), our NAEP results have been disappointing. These federal investments did help us build consistently high academic standards, stronger teacher and leader pipelines, much better early-learning infrastructure, and one of the best data systems in the country. But these improvements were being swamped by economic reality. As the number of low-income students rose to nearly 40 percent of the population, new data showed that more than 40 percent of our high school graduates were not ready to take credit-bearing coursework at local colleges. And employers said that too many of their new hires weren't ready to succeed without considerable additional training.

Though we saw some positive trends relative to a number of other states, our low-income, African American, and Hispanic students and those with disabilities were graduating at far lower rates, were less likely to enroll in college, and more likely to need remedial coursework if they did attend. Given that our children of color were the new majority, it was clear: The existing high school model was not working for everyone and was failing some groups of young people at disproportionately high rates. At least as telling: Students often stated that what they were learning in school just wasn't relevant.

In short, we had a crisis on multiple fronts. Our economic infrastructure was more fragile than it had been in decades—and it was starved for the talent needed to rebound. And our K–12 leaders knew they needed to rethink what school looked like—high school especially—and how they were partnering with higher education, parents, and employers.

**Building Momentum.** By the time Delaware Pathways started to emerge in 2014, it was like water hitting a parched garden. Former Governor Jack Markell connected with Bob Schwartz of Harvard and learned about a new initiative called Pathways to Prosperity. After a public discussion on the topic at the University of Delaware, our business leaders, including a group called the Delaware Business Roundtable Education Committee (DBREC) and Rodel, worked with the state to enroll in the Pathways Network. In parallel, our largest high school, William Penn, was partnering with Delaware Technical Community College to build a new “advanced manufacturing” pathway to develop students who could support the state’s manufacturing workforce, including leading-edge companies like Bloom Energy, which was interested in expanding to Delaware and needed a highly skilled workforce to help them design fuel cells.

The momentum built quickly. Key to that growth was leadership, people, and a plan. Governor Markell started the race, and current governor John Carney has taken the baton and is running with it. Having state leaders signal to the public and private sectors that this is important has been crucial. And Delaware being a small state also helped. We all talk to one another—and the people implementing the work are critical. Some important leaders in our Department of Education, Department of Labor,

and Workforce Development Board started meeting regularly with the governor's office, along with some key nonprofit and business leaders. This cross-sector collaboration was held together with a strong strategic plan. (A case study by Jobs for the Future and Harvard gives more detail about Delaware's efforts.) The plan is clear, bold, and simple. It lays out roles and responsibilities, and the working team uses it as a framework for not only quarterly "stock takes," but as a way to maximize every dollar we bring in through a braided public and private sector funding strategy.

**Taking Stock.** Today, all of our nineteen school districts offer at least one career pathway option. For students and their families, the benefits are clear: Young people begin exploring realistic and in-demand careers, but they're able to do this pressure-free, while they're teenagers, then sharpen their focus as they progress through high school and into postsecondary education. Job shadowing and work-based learning give them a personal look into what their future holds. And if they don't like what they see, they can change the picture *before* embarking on college. These experiences help students gain essential employability skills, including teamwork, communications, and perseverance. And opportunities for dual enrollment and industry credentials are major time and money savers.

As for the state's political and business leaders, they're excited that the solution to new economic challenges could be right under their noses. The prospect of a well-prepared, pre-trained army of budding professionals in their own backyard is a big motivator. As a result, many of our top employers—from storied Dupont to emerging tech firms—are working hand-in-hand with K–12 schools, our community college system, and others to invest in Delaware's future workforce.

**The Path Ahead.** We still have a lot to do, as we're not even halfway to our goal of 20,000 students by 2020. But we are on a good path. Delaware Tech, our statewide "intermediary," is building out a new office of work-based learning to connect the dots among employers and students. And our state leaders have been smart and adept in leveraging federal, state, and private sector partnerships with JPMorgan Chase and Bloomberg Philanthropies, as well as at least fifteen of Delaware's own major employers.

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As Jon Schnur of America Achieves recently pointed out at Delaware's annual Pathways Conference, "Our world is changing faster than at any time in its history, arguably faster than the Industrial Revolution. The implications of not adequately responding to these shifts is that it has the potential to destabilize our democracy."

This is not just an interesting initiative, and not just something for Delaware. It's pivotal to our nation's future. If we can work collectively to create real and lasting linkages to bridge the gaps between high

school, higher education, and work, we have an opportunity to rethink, and to continue adapting, what public education needs to look like to give our kids a chance to thrive in a world we can't yet see.

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*The views expressed herein represent the opinions of the author and not necessarily the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.*