

ExcelinEd

Leading for Impact:

Building Better Pathways Through Strong Governance

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Executive Summary

Overview

Students need well-defined, predictable "pathways" from school to good jobs. These pathways provide organized sequences of courses and experiences, including dual credit, career and technical education, industry credentials and work-based learning, that help students move from high school into college, training and careers. But in too many states, pathways are confusing, uneven, or simply unavailable, leaving students without a clear route forward and employers without the talent pipeline they need. When governance is unclear, execution breaks down: decisions stall, agencies duplicate work, and efforts drift out of sync.

To understand why strong pathways remain the exception rather than the rule, Excel*in*Ed conducted a multi-phase research study comprised of a 50-state scan, a 20-state survey, and interviews with leaders from 10 states. The research revealed a central finding: **governance, not goodwill, is the missing piece.**

> In this report, governance means the intentional and explicit alignment of state agencies, priorities and resources led by a cross-sector (K-12, postsecondary, workforce, employers) pathways structure working toward an aligned vision.

Research indicates that across the country, states organize pathways governance in four primary ways—Governor's cabinet models, multiple-agency models, quarterback models, and vertical models—but structure alone does not guarantee effectiveness. Twenty-nine states have no formal governance structure at all, relying instead on ad hoc coordination that varies by project. Even in states with formal models, employers and workforce agencies are frequently absent, leaving major gaps in alignment and execution. As one respondent noted, "Many states say pathways are working, but results fall short because key partners—especially employers and workforce agencies—are not consistently engaged." States with formal structures in place often lack clear authority, consistent participation, or a shared statewide vision. In some states, leaders could not explain who was responsible for what or how decisions were made.

Governors are uniquely positioned to lead this work because they are the only actors who can bring the full system together. No single agency can align education, workforce, and employer priorities on its own. Governors can work with legislators to establish one durable statewide governance structure in law, give it the authority to set priorities and align funding, and require the participation of the education, workforce, and employer leaders needed to carry the work forward. They can also ensure that the state uses clear data to track results, improve what works, and hold agencies accountable for outcomes.

This is not only an education priority; it is also an economic development imperative. When governors lead with a coherent strategy and durable governance structure, pathways can move from piecemeal efforts to a statewide system that consistently prepares students for the next step and helps employers build the talent pipeline they need.

Excel*in*Ed's statewide governance model policy and executive order language provide a strong starting point for state leaders to craft policies that reflect these findings and fit their state's context.

This report outlines what states can do to fix the issue. Based on the research, the following recommendations emerged:

1. **Codify a Governor's Cabinet in statute** to coordinate statewide pathways.
2. **Bring the right partners together**—K-12, higher education, workforce leaders, and employers—with shared responsibility for designing and improving pathways.
3. **Give the governance body real authority** to set statewide vision, priorities, goals, and definitions so agencies move in the same direction.
4. **Align funding to the statewide pathways strategy** so resources, incentives, and staffing support shared priorities across agencies.
5. **Use data to drive decisions and accountability** so leaders can track outcomes, target improvements, and keep partners engaged over time.

Taken together, these steps create the conditions for strong, aligned pathways that students can understand and navigate—and that employers can trust. With clear governance, states can move from scattered initiatives to a coherent statewide strategy that consistently delivers for students, communities, and the economy.

Research Overview

To understand how states approach pathways governance, Excel*in*Ed conducted several phases of research: a 50-state scan of publicly available information, a 20-state survey (Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Utah, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington) and interviews with leaders from 10 states (Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Nebraska, Ohio, Utah, and Tennessee).

The Pathways Governance Landscape

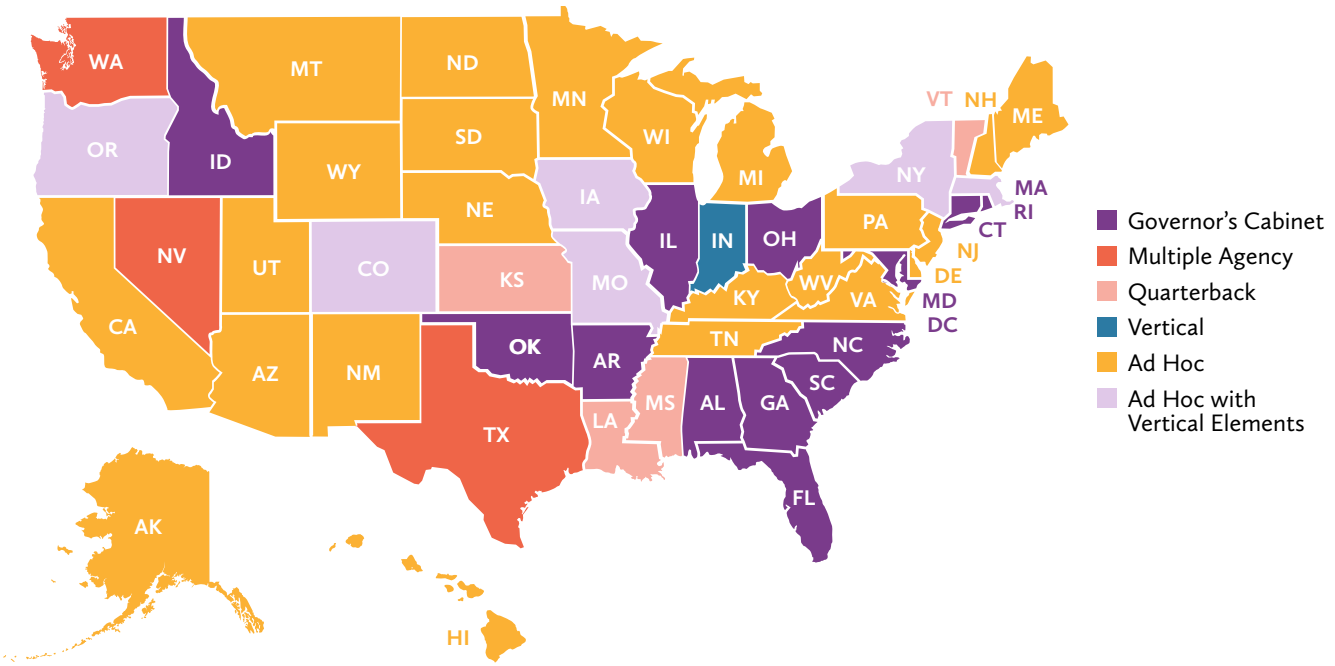
Through the state scan, Excel*in*Ed identified four types of formal governance structures that exist in 21 states and the District of Columbia. Notably, Georgia passed a law in 2026 to adopt a formal governance structure. The remaining 29 states have no formal structure, which means state agencies address pathways on an ad hoc basis, coming together for specific projects, irregularly, or not at all.

Where formal models exist, states typically organize pathways governance in one of four ways:

- **Governor's Cabinet model:** Establishes a dedicated office to coordinate agencies with centralized oversight and authority.
- **Multiple-agency model:** Distributes responsibility across major agencies to set a common goal for the state while sharing data, planning and execution of the state's priorities.
- **Quarterback model:** Designates a lead agency to "call the plays" that other agencies will execute while retaining authority over their own programs and funding.
- **Vertical model:** Consolidates secondary and postsecondary education, two-year community colleges and four-year universities, within a single agency, providing unified leadership across the education continuum.
- **Ad hoc model:** Planning and execution involves multiple agencies for specific projects, but not as a systemic effort.
- **Ad hoc- vertical model:** Multiple parts of the system, such as K-12, postsecondary, community colleges or technical education are under the same leadership/in one agency, but no additional systemic pathways governance exists.

Figure 1

Governance Structures Identified across the United States



Who Leads Pathways Governance in the States

While collaboration is an essential element of governance, having a lead agency with clear authority to make decisions within the structure is important. Survey responses confirm considerable variation in how states structure and assign authority within their pathways governance system.

- States with formal pathways governance typically place leadership, or decision-making power, within departments of education.
- While seven of 23 respondents identified the state workforce office as the lead agency, education offices were much more often noted, including postsecondary education office (nine survey respondents), K-12 department of education (six respondents), and a combined K–12 and postsecondary education agency that includes community colleges, technical colleges, and state four-year institutions (six respondents).
- Many agencies and entities have formal decision-making roles, showing that decision-making authority is shared across states, even when those agencies are not the lead. For example, while the governor's office was only named as the lead agency by five respondents, 12 respondents noted that the governor's office holds formal decision-making authority within the governance structure.

Figure 2

Who is/are the lead agency/agencies with main decision-making power in your state's current pathway governance?

Select all that apply
(among those with formal structure, n = 23)

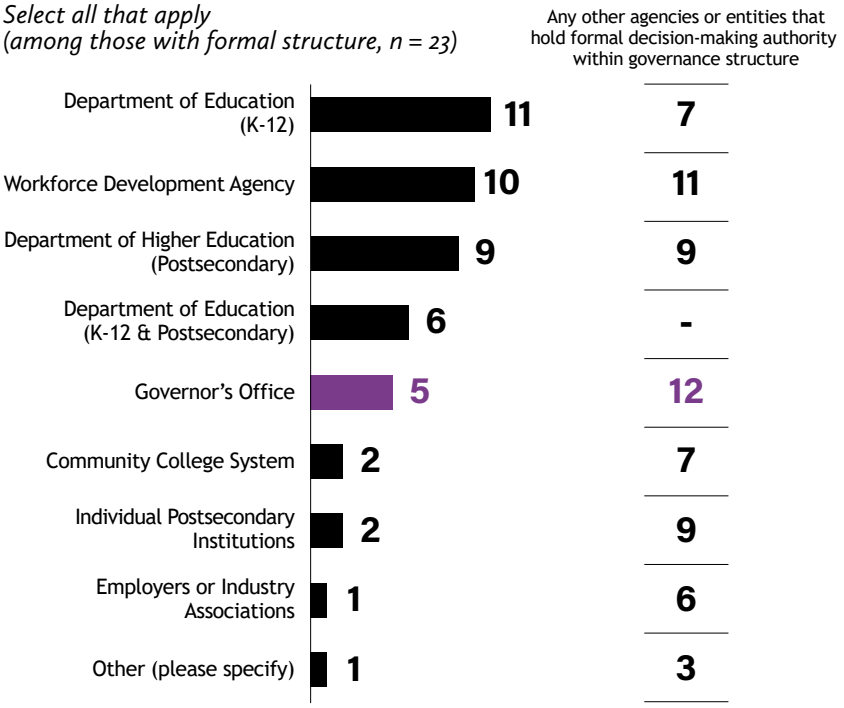
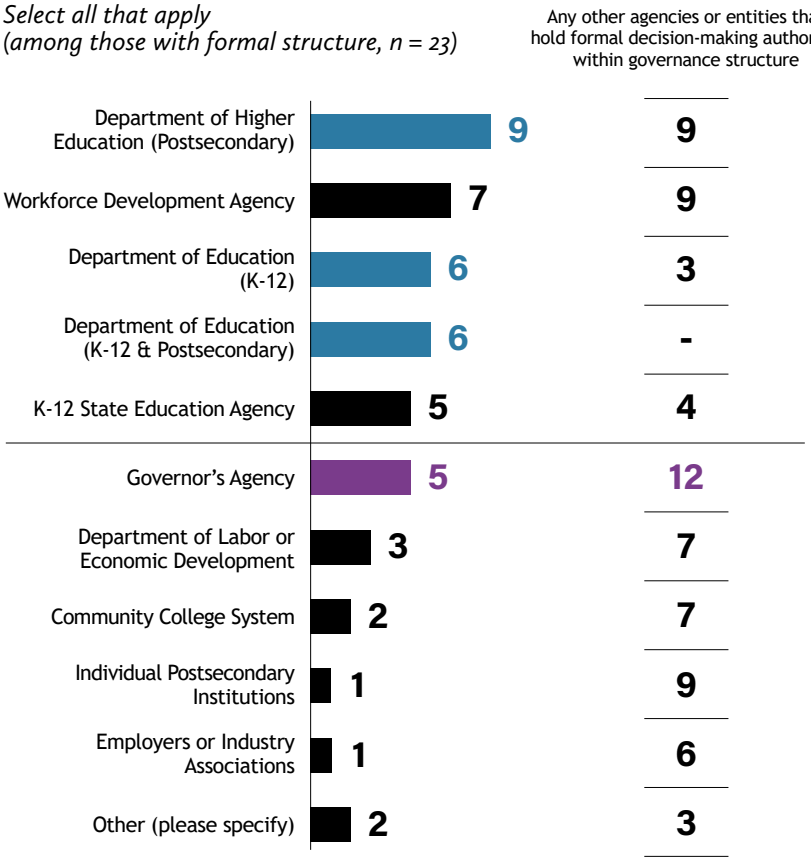


Figure 3

Who is/are the lead agency/agencies with main decision-making power in your state's current pathway governance?

Select all that apply
(among those with formal structure, n = 23)



State Perceptions of Governance Orientation and Effectiveness

Interviews with state leaders also shed light on how state leaders view the orientation and effectiveness of their pathways governance systems. When asked to describe their pathways governance, interviewed state leaders rated their states more "action-oriented" than "compliance-oriented" (3.9 vs. 2.9 on a 5-point scale). Those that rated themselves as action-oriented also rated themselves higher on effectiveness.

Employer and Workforce Partner Engagement is the Missing Link

Many states say pathways are working, but results fall short because key partners—especially employers and workforce agencies—are not consistently engaged. Without these partners, coordination breaks down and progress slows. Even states with formal governance tend to rate their work as only "good," showing that structure alone is not enough without strong participation and follow-through.

Figure 4

State Perceptions of Governance Orientation and Effectiveness

On a scale of 1 to 5, how well does the phrase *"action-oriented"* describe your state's pathways governance?

3.9
mean

Action-oriented **>** Compliance-oriented: **FL, IN, AR, IA, TN, UT**

On a scale of 1 to 5, how well does the phrase *"compliance-oriented"* describe your state's pathways governance?

2.9
mean

Action-oriented **<** Compliance-oriented: **MS, NE**

On a scale of 1 to 5, how effective is pathways governance in your state?

3.5
mean

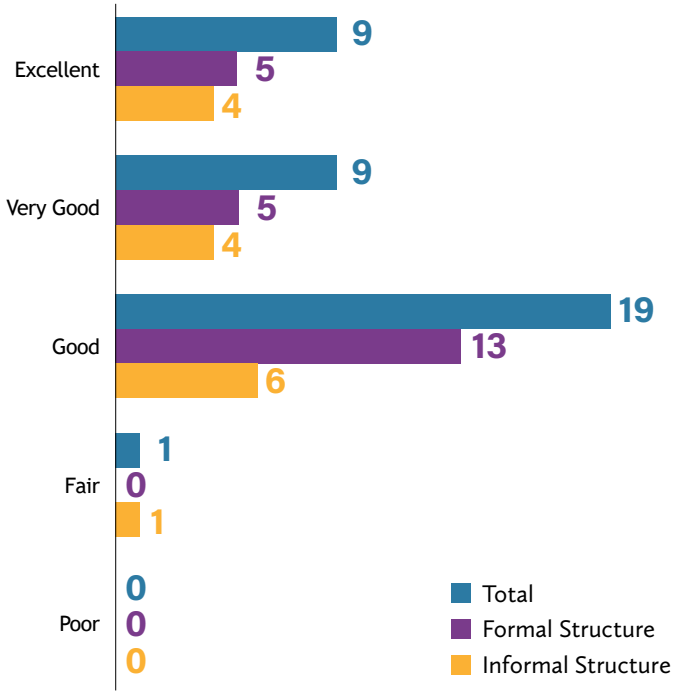
States with Scores **>** 3: **FL, IN, AR, IA, TN, OH**

Figure 5

How States Rate Their Pathways Quality

Just under 1/2 report their state is doing at least a very good job delivering high-quality pathways.

How would you rate how well your state is currently delivering high-quality pathways for its learners?
(n = 38)



Research Findings and Recommendations

Based on Excel*in*Ed's research, five recommendations emerged to support states in strengthening pathways governance. Recommendation 1 is designed for the 29 states with ad hoc coordination. Specifics on recommendation 1 for states with existing structures are in table 1 below.

Recommendation 1:
Codify a Governor's Cabinet to coordinate statewide pathways in statute.

Although there are benefits and drawbacks to all governance structures, our research suggests that the Governor's Cabinet model offers important advantages. A respondent noted "We've learned that it can't just be informal check-ins. You need standing participation from K-12, higher ed, workforce, and industry so alignment isn't dependent on who happens to show up."

A strong statutory governance structure, such as a Governor's Cabinet, needs to clearly define what should happen:

- Designate a lead entity, such as the Governor's office, responsible for the statewide pathways strategy,
- Require participation from key partners from K-12, postsecondary, workforce agencies, and employer participation at the table,
- Grant explicit authority to set the statewide vision and priorities,
- Align funding to support statewide pathways strategy, and
- Use data to guide decisions, track outcomes and improve results.

The following table illustrates the primary governance models identified in the research and the key actions states can take to strengthen each one in law and practice.

Table 1
Key Actions to Strengthen Governance Models

Model	Key Actions
Multiple Agency	Ensure that one entity is responsible for convening the group regularly and there are defined roles and responsibilities. Set meeting cadence, roles, and decision rights so work does not depend on relationships alone.
Quarterback	Clarify what the lead agency can decide versus what authority and responsibility the partner agencies retain.
Vertical	Preserve unified education leadership between K-12 and postsecondary education while codifying the role and participation of the workforce agency and employers in pathways governance.



State Spotlight:
Georgia (Governor's Cabinet)

Formalizing Pathways Governance Through Cross-Agency Coordination: GA HB 1302 strengthens Georgia's governance framework by improving alignment across K-12 education, postsecondary education, and workforce development. The new law restructures the state's education and workforce framework to expand cross-agency roles, align federal workforce planning, strengthen apprenticeship pathways, and improve education-to-career data coordination. Specifically, it renames and expands the Office of Student Achievement, repeals the Alliance of Education Agency Heads, formally establishes a state apprenticeship agency, strengthens apprenticeship programs, aligns federal workforce planning, and expands education-to-career data coordination.

Bottom line: Georgia's 2026 legislation creates a strong foundation, but its impact will depend on implementation: bringing the right partners together to set a shared vision, use data, and align funding.

Recommendation 2:
Bring the right partners together —K-12, colleges, workforce leaders, and employers— as a governance body to design high-quality pathways.

Research Context

Survey respondents indicated that workforce agencies and employers are not consistently at the table. Surveyed respondents (13 of 13) indicated the need for the workforce development agency to be represented in formalized or expanded pathways efforts, and 11 of 13 leaders desired to see greater involvement from employers. Leaders said this absence limits the state's ability to build and execute one cohesive, statewide pathways strategy. Without consistent, cross-sector participation, especially from those closest to labor market demand, existing governance structures cannot fully deliver on the promise of high-quality, seamless pathways.

"You have to have the right people at the table who are collaborative by nature—who can see the bigger picture and not just focus on their own work."
– Formal Structure

"When trust is not there, and there's no entity with the power to decide, progress stalls."
– Ad Hoc Structure

"Without the input of industry saying, 'Does this actually matter?' I don't think a governance structure works."
– Ad Hoc Structure

Recommendation

States must have the right leaders at the same table: K-12, postsecondary, the workforce system, and employers. These partners need both a stake in pathways success and a role in making the system work from classroom to career. **Many states do not have the right partners consistently engaged to deliver high-quality pathways.**

States need a structure where the key state agencies and employers participate consistently and are expected to make decisions together. The most effective members are trusted, action-oriented leaders who can work across agency lines, commit their organizations, and are accountable for results. States should include individuals such as state education chiefs, higher education commissioners, workforce office directors, governor's policy directors, and business leaders to ensure broad and unique perspectives.



State Spotlight:
Arkansas (Governor's Cabinet)

Shared leadership aligning education and workforce priorities: Arkansas uses a Governor's cabinet model that brings together leaders from K–12, higher education, workforce, and economic development to set shared priorities and coordinate action. Rather than a single entity driving direction, agencies collectively define the state's vision, which is shaped by regional workforce needs and employer input. The Career Education and Workforce Development (CEWD) system organizes programs into career clusters aligned to priority industries. Regional workforce boards and employers play a formal role in identifying these sectors, and agencies coordinate funding and initiatives through the cabinet to reduce duplication.

Bottom line: Arkansas builds strong cross-sector buy-in, but progress depends on sustained coordination and shared ownership.

Recommendation 3:
Give the governance body clear authority to set the statewide vision, priorities, goals, and definitions.

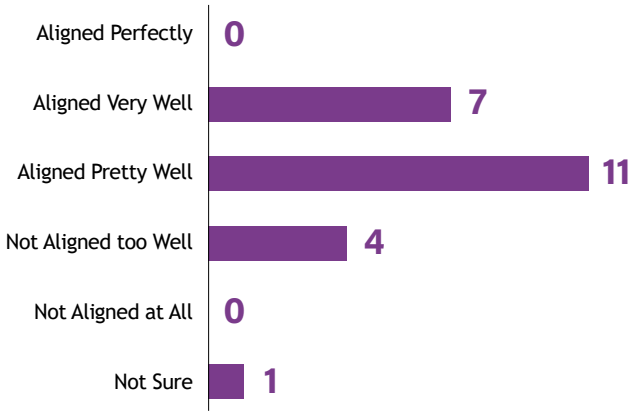
Research Context

Participants want alignment, but many states lack vision and shared language. While some states have formal governance structures, they do not always produce unified direction. Vision-setting is often split across multiple entities or driven externally, making it harder for partners to coordinate efforts and deliver shared outcomes. Notably, the 50-state scan identified only 14 states as having a publicly communicated statewide pathways vision.

Alignment is a priority, but coordination lags. Leaders noted stronger alignment between K-12 and postsecondary systems as a top priority for current initiatives (13 of 14 survey respondents), followed by data integration across systems, credential attainment, work-based learning, and career technical education (12 of 14 for each). Too often, efforts move forward in parallel rather than as a coordinated strategy, limiting impact and slowing progress toward statewide goals. As one participant explained, "What we're missing isn't really vision—its goals and measurable objectives. People are taking their piece and running with it, but it's not all toward the same thing in the next three to five years."

Figure 6
K-12 and Postsecondary Pathways Alignment

On a scale of 1 to 5, how well does the phrase *"action-oriented"* describe your state's pathways governance?
(n = 23)



These findings highlight a fundamental tension: states value alignment, but without a shared vision, common goals, and consistent language, efforts remain fragmented and hard to scale. Even where governance structures exist, vision is often missing or unclear. Among states with a formal governance body, only 12 of 23 respondents reported having a formal vision or plan. Eight states are still developing one, and three states have no plans to do so. Importantly, even when a vision exists or is in development, it is not always led by the governance body itself. Of the 20 respondents whose states have or are creating a vision, only half said the governance structure set it, while seven reported that the vision came from the governor's office.

Figure 7
Adoption of Formal Vision/Strategic Plan for Pathways

Has your state's governance adopted a formal vision or strategic plan for its approach to pathways?
(among those with formal structures, n = 23)

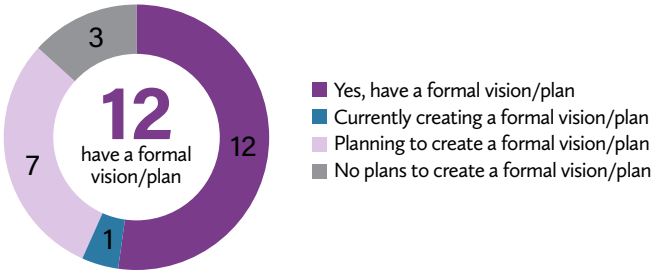
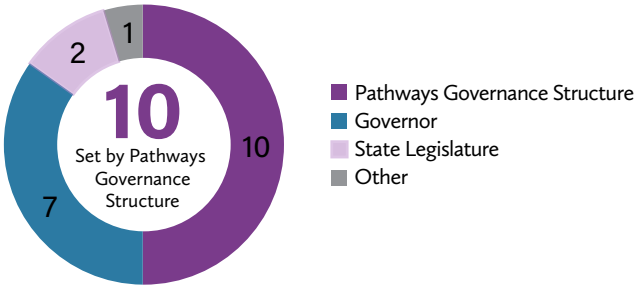


Figure 8
Who Sets the State's Unified Vision/Plan?
(n = 20)



> *"[The Governor] took all the various state agencies and consolidated them under 8 distinct secretaries…so that's much easier for the governor to just communicate directly to [the Secretary' the vision…and then, it's kind of [the Secretary's] responsibility to corral the various operators in the agency under that one unified vision."*
> ***– Formal Structure***

Table 2

Use of Statewide Definitions for High-Demand, High-Wage and High-Skill Occupations

	Statewide Definitions	No Statewide Definitions, Individual Agencies Have One	No Definitions/ Not Sure
High-Demand Occupations	16	7	0
High-Wage Occupations	15	7	1
High-Skill Occupations	11	9	3

Survey respondents see the value of common statewide definitions, but they also explain that it can be difficult to establish these terms. About one in three of the 23 respondents surveyed do not have statewide definitions for high-demand, high-wage and high-skill occupations, with the fewest states having defined high-skill occupations.

> *"I think it would be valuable to have a codified definition of high value, high demand pathways, or, or… What makes something high-value, or high-wage, high demand?"*
> ***– Formal Structure***

> *"If we were to do this again, it would be about bringing state leadership in early — getting the right leaders together to have real conversations about what this governance should look like and what the priorities are, so everyone is working toward the same expectations."*
> ***– Formal Structure***

> *"Strength of policy is that it lines things up so you don't have to make the case every time. You just move."*
> ***– Formal Structure***

Recommendation

A strong, cross sector leadership body with real decision-making authority is essential to building and sustaining pathways. This body can ensure a focused, long-term vision that outlasts political cycles and keeps students, along with local and state economic needs, at the center. **Authority must rest with those responsible for implementation.** With authority, leaders can set shared priorities, establish measurable statewide goals, adopt common definitions, and align K-12, postsecondary, and workforce strategies so systems work together rather than in isolation.

Statewide alignment does not happen simply because leaders agree on big picture ideas. Implementers must be engaged early so strategy translates into day-to-day action across agencies. Leaders emphasized that policy and statute fall short when agencies are not aligned on roles, timelines, and operational decisions. When leadership, policy, and implementation are aligned, states remove barriers faster, sustain momentum, and deliver coherent pathways over time.

State Spotlight: Utah (Ad Hoc)

Integrated system delivering coordinating pathways: Utah operates a coordinated governance approach that aligns K–12 and postsecondary systems around a shared approach to pathways. Leadership across education systems is intentionally connected, with institutions working together rather than operating independently. The state's Pathways program serves as a common playbook, outlining structured sequences of courses and credentials that span high school and postsecondary and connect to priority industries. School districts and technical colleges coordinate program offerings so students can earn college credit and industry credentials while still in high school. Governance in Utah focuses on aligning systems to deliver seamless pathways, rather than setting direction from a single entity.

Bottom line: Utah delivers seamless student experiences, but requires strong, ongoing coordination across institutions to sustain alignment—a fragile approach given the lack of statute.

Recommendation 4:
Align funding with the statewide pathways strategy.

Research Context

Interview responses reinforced Excel*in*Ed's hypothesis that effective governance requires statutory authority to set statewide priorities and make funding decisions across agencies. Pathways governance is strongest when leaders at the table control both strategy and resources. In these cases, funding becomes a powerful lever—moving work from planning to implementation, aligning partners around shared priorities, and accelerating action statewide.

> *"The strength of the policy is that it lines things up —credentials, funding, incentives — so you don't have to make the case every time. You can just move."* ***– Formal Structure***

Participants emphasized that aligning funding with priority credentials and programs is a powerful lever for collaboration. When incentives are tied to shared goals, agencies are more likely to work together, reduce duplicative efforts, and focus on coherent, high-quality pathways.

> *"A lot of what's happening…requires collaboration if you're going to participate in some of these initiatives, or funding opportunities. You're being incentivized to work better together."*
> ***– Formal Structure***

> *"It's top-down, bottom-up…immediately, you've got a governance structure that's top-down, saying, this is what we're going to do, this is how we want to do it, this is why it's important, and then from the bottom up, the people that are doing the work and setting up the systems now are incentivized based upon some sort of a funding mechanism."*
> ***–Ad Hoc Structure***

At the same time, aligning funding is challenging. States must coordinate multiple funding streams with different rules and incentives and ensure they reinforce, rather than compete with, one another. Leaders also noted political and technical resistance from stakeholders invested in the status quo. These challenges underscore both the complexity and the importance of funding alignment to scale effective pathways statewide.

> *"Every time that we're reforming, you are threatening incumbent interests that are benefiting from the current system – and they always fight you."*
> ***– Formal Structure***

Recommendation

The right people need to have funding authority. A state can establish a formal statewide pathways governance structure with clear authority to set priorities, align incentives, and coordinate funding across agencies. The leaders responsible for implementation should first review all relevant federal and statewide funding streams to understand how current dollars are being used, where incentives are misaligned, and where opportunities exist to braid, coordinate, or redirect funding. When the right leaders have visibility into funding streams and the authority to align resources, the state is better positioned to sustain high-quality pathways over time.



State Spotlight:
Indiana (Vertical)

State-led system with required, career-aligned pathways: Indiana operates a top-down governance model, with the Governor's office setting the statewide vision for pathways and driving priorities across agencies. The Governor's Workforce Cabinet was highly effective under one governor but less so under the next administration. The state has recently strengthened vertical alignment by placing a single leader over both the K–12 Department of Education and the Commission for Higher Education, creating a more unified structure across the education continuum. Agencies—including the Department of Education, Commission for Higher Education, and Department of Workforce Development—are expected to align their work to this direction. The state has codified its vision through the Graduation Pathways framework, which requires students to complete defined, career-aligned experiences such as credentials, work-based learning, or postsecondary readiness benchmarks. Program approval and funding decisions are tied to these priorities, ensuring consistency across the system.

Bottom line: Indiana can move quickly and set coherent statewide expectations, but success depends on strong local implementation.

Recommendation 5:
Build data systems that show results and drive decisions.

Research Context

States are action-oriented but not outcomes-driven. While survey respondents rated their states more "action-oriented" than "compliance-oriented", a focus on action doesn't always produce outcomes. Respondents rarely described how success is measured, how pathway quality is evaluated, or how student outcomes inform leadership decisions. As a result, pathways efforts are often framed around projects rather than measurable goals or evidence of impact.

While states invest in pathways data, it is not used consistently to guide decisions, prioritize funding, assess effectiveness, or determine what should be scaled or discontinued. Half of survey respondents (19 of 37) were unsure how often their State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) data is reviewed or updated; nearly two-thirds of that group (13 of 19) came from states that rated their pathways delivery as only good, fair, or poor. Within those good-, fair-, or poor-rated states, survey respondents noted big opportunities to enhance reporting and create a better SLDS interface. Specifically, these opportunities include improving the quality of workforce and industry data, as well as increasing both awareness of and access to the SLDS within the state.

Without actionable outcomes data and intentional use of SLDS, states struggle to align efforts, demonstrate results, and make strategic funding decisions—limiting the ability to scale high-quality pathways statewide.

While states invest in data collection, several survey participants shared that their states are not using data to guide decisions, assess pathway quality, or measure student outcomes. This limits their ability to scale what works and discontinue what does not. As a result, states struggle to scale what works and stop what does not. Too often, action-oriented efforts emphasize implementation without being tied to measurable outcomes, limiting impact and long-term effectiveness.

Recommendation

States should strengthen statewide data collection and use data to drive decisions, justify funding, and engage public and private partners. A strong data system should help leaders understand which pathways are producing results for students and meeting workforce needs. When data is transparent, accessible, and tied to outcomes, policymakers can make more informed choices about which programs to scale, which gaps to address, and where resources should be redirected. This also gives employers, workforce agencies, education leaders, and the public a clearer picture of whether the state's pathways strategy is working. In this way, data becomes more than a reporting tool—it becomes a mechanism for accountability, continuous improvement, and sustained partner engagement.

Conclusion

States cannot scale high-quality education-to-workforce pathways without well-defined, durable governance empowered to align K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and industry partners. Our findings show that fragmented leadership, inconsistent participation, and unclear authority lead to duplication, uneven implementation, and missed opportunities for students and employers. To address this issue, states can codify a statewide pathways governance structure in statute and ensure the right leaders—particularly workforce and industry—have decision-making authority. That body must set a shared statewide vision, common definitions of quality, and shared priorities across systems. With authority over funding, leaders can align incentives and reduce competing initiatives. And by strengthening data use and transparency, states can make decisions based on outcomes, improve quality, and scale what works.

Together, these actions create the structure, authority, and accountability needed to expand economic mobility for students and build a reliable pipeline of high-wage, high-skill, high-demand talent.

About the Research

To understand how states are approaching pathways governance today, this report draws on several phases of research, including a 50-state scan examining publicly available resources, as well as a comprehensive 20-state survey, and interviews with leaders from 10 states. The 50-state scan examined resources such as agency websites, state statutes, Perkins V plans, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) plans, governors' executive orders, and cabinet structures.

ExcelinEd conducted a 50-state scan to examine current pathways governance structures through a review of publicly available sources. This scan provided a comprehensive overview of how states organize and coordinate pathways-related efforts.

The 50-state scan revealed that states currently employ several education-to-workforce governance models with varying degrees of success, including:

(1) a **Governor's cabinet model** that creates a dedicated office to coordinate agencies with centralized oversight and authority,

(2) a **multiple-agency model** where decentralized major agencies are empowered to set a common goal for the state while sharing data, planning and execution of the state's priorities,

(3) a **quarterback model** that authorizes a lead agency to "call the plays" that other agencies will execute while retaining authority over their own programs and funding,

(4) a **vertical model** in which secondary education and the full postsecondary education sector including community colleges, technical colleges, and four-year institutions, are housed within a single agency, providing unified leadership across the education continuum, and

(5) an **ad hoc model** where planning and execution involves multiple agencies for specific projects, but not as a systemic effort,

(6) an **ad hoc vertical model** where multiple parts of the system, such as K-12, postsecondary, community colleges or technical education are under the same leadership/in one agency, but no additional systemic pathways governance exists.

To understand how these structures work in practice, Excel*in*Ed partnered with Edge Research to conduct a 20-state survey of state agency and education-to-workforce leaders from a diverse geographic distribution and a range of governance structures. The survey explored how states develop and implement a unified vision and shared priorities, how funding is aligned to support those priorities and how states communicate a consistent, student-centered message across systems. Surveyed states included Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Utah, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. The survey provided deeper insights into pathways governance, including strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

Finally, one-on-one interviews with leaders from 10 states—Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Nebraska, Ohio, Utah, and Tennessee—offered a more detailed understanding of current governance models. These conversations further explored perceived strengths and weaknesses, lessons learned, and the elements that state leaders believe are essential for an ideal governance structure capable of supporting high-quality pathways at scale.

Together, this research shows that strong, intentional governance is essential to building high-quality pathways that work for students. The report brings these insights together to assess how current governance models perform and what states need to improve them. Based on these findings, Excel*in*Ed developed several recommendations to help states strengthen governance so students can move more seamlessly from school to postsecondary education and into careers.

Part I:
50-State Scan: What the Scan Reviewed and Identified

To understand how states organize education-to-workforce pathways, Excel*in*Ed reviewed publicly available information across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. This scan examined laws, executive orders, state plans, agency websites, and cabinet structures to identify (1) how pathways are governed, (2) whether governance is established in statute, (3) who leads coordination, (4) what policies support cross-agency work, and (5) whether states have a clear statewide pathways vision.

Identified Governance Structures

Governor's Cabinet model: 13 states and the District of Columbia were identified as having a Governor's cabinet-style pathways governance model: Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and South Carolina. (All are established in statute.)

Multiple-agency model: Three states were identified as having a multiple-agency pathways governance model: Nevada, Texas, and Washington.

Quarterback model: Four states were identified as having a quarterback model: Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Vermont.

Vertical model: One state was identified as having a vertical pathways governance model: Indiana.

Ad hoc / no formal model identified: The scan did not identify a formal statewide pathways governance model in 29 states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Of these 29 states, six states with vertical-model characteristics were identified, where certain education agencies are combined but no formal statewide pathways governance model was identified: Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, Missouri, Oregon and New York.

Notably, the scan reflects only what was identifiable through publicly available documentation. In the survey and interviews, however, some state leaders described their governance structure differently than what was apparent in public materials—highlighting that pathways governance is often a complex structure, not always clearly communicated or consistently understood, even by those individuals working within state education-to-workforce systems.

Part II:
Surveys and Interviews

To deepen the scan and build a more comprehensive picture of pathways governance across the country, Excel*in*Ed conducted a structured survey and a series of one-on-one interviews with state leaders. Together, these methods provide both breadth and depth—capturing how governance structures are designed, how they function in practice, and what state leaders believe is needed to strengthen them.

State Surveys

Excel*in*Ed and Edge Research surveyed leaders in 20 states, representing diverse regions and governance models. The survey examined how pathways governance works in practice—highlighting what is working, where challenges remain, and where states see the greatest opportunities for improvement.

Leaders shared insights on existing governance structures, participating agencies and employers, how states set vision and priorities, how funding and program decisions are made, and where gaps in alignment or authority persist. Together, these responses provide a clear picture of how governance functions across states and what changes leaders believe are needed to strengthen pathways statewide.

State Interviews

Excel*in*Ed conducted one-on-one interviews with leaders in 10 states to gain deeper insight into how pathways governance works in practice. These conversations explored how governance structures operate day-to-day and how they shape policy, program design, and cross-agency coordination.

State leaders shared lessons on what is working, where challenges remain, and how governance can better advance high-wage, high-skill, high-demand pathways. Interviews also highlighted opportunities to strengthen alignment across K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and industry—and the practical steps states believe are needed to improve governance and outcomes.



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