

## Testimony on Expanding Career-Connected Learning in Ohio

### Presented on Behalf of the Career-Connected Learning Coalition

Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Cassie Palsgrove, and I am here today on behalf of Ohio Excels and the Career-Connected Learning Coalition, which includes a diverse group of organizations dedicated to policy solutions that expand career-connected learning opportunities for all Ohio students.

Members of the coalition include a broad range of stakeholder groups, including teachers, superintendents, school counselors, career-tech leaders, business groups, state agencies and more to develop the comprehensive proposal attached to my testimony. Here is the list of organizations that endorse the proposal: Alliance for High Quality Education, ExcelinEd, Greater Cleveland Career Consortium, Learn to Earn Dayton, Ohio Association of Career-Technical Educators, Ohio Farm Bureau, Ohio Federation of Teachers, Sean P. Dunn & Associates, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and Ohio Excels.

Together, these organizations are working to ensure that students across the state have access to high-quality career exploration, coaching, and pathways that align with their interests and abilities and Ohio's workforce needs. This has required deep analysis of national, state, and local level efforts, along with examining systems-focused, scalable policy solutions. This work over the last year has led us to coalesce around five major policy pillars for this state budget: 1) Career Exploration 2) Workforce Data 3) In-Demand Credentials 4) Work-Based Learning and 5) Expanding Career-Technical Education.

**The Urgent Need for Career-Connected Learning:** Ohio is at a pivotal moment. Our economy is booming, with over 100,000 job openings paying \$50,000 or more annually, yet too many of our students leave high school unprepared to seize these opportunities. In our new report entitled [Reality Check](#), data confirms that **nearly half of Ohio's graduating Class of 2017 did not pursue education or training beyond high school**. At the same time, a recent statewide poll shows overwhelming support from Ohio voters and parents for expanding career-connected learning with **90% of parents** believing it's important for their child to have a plan that maps out their pathway to a career, and the majority believing career exposure and advising activities should happen in school.

We commend the Governor for taking important steps in this budget to support career-connected learning. Specifically, we support:

- Policies like the inclusion of career planning into graduation plans. These plans help students identify their post-graduation career goals and aim to align their high school experience to them. This is a crucial step in putting students in the driver's seat of their education.
- The budget begins the process of changing the way we value industry-recognized credentials in K-12 education with goal of more realistically signaling a credential's true value in the workplace.
- The coalition is also in support of maintaining the language eliminating the waiver that allows schools to opt out of offering career-technical education in 7th and 8th grades. We believe every middle school student should have an opportunity to start their technical pathway.
- Current budget provisions also move forward with rating the Readiness component on Ohio School Report Cards. This gives schools credit for important career-focused programming and college readiness indicators.
- We also support the continued investments in the various workforce preparation efforts as they move us closer to a system where all students have clear pathways to prosperous futures.

While these investments are a strong foundation, we urge the General Assembly to go further by incorporating the Career-Connected Learning Coalition's remaining recommendations:

1. **Make Career and Graduation Planning Meaningful by Starting in Middle School:** Career exploration should not wait until high school. We strongly support requiring a structured, semester-long career exploration course or its equivalent for every middle schooler. This course would ensure every student gains exposure to

Ohio's 16 career fields, interprets career interest and aptitude assessments with counselors, mentors, and coaches, and begins career planning experiences early. The best part is we have many examples of how schools across the state are already doing this and doing it well. It's time to make sure all of our students have the same opportunity. To ensure career exploration is delivered effectively statewide, middle school teachers and career coaches need professional development aligned with a new Career Coaching Framework and Model Curricula for Career Exploration.

2. **Create Structures to Better Use Workforce and Education Data:** Ohio is blessed to have a strong foundation of early childhood, K-12, higher education, and workforce data. However, the state could be doing much more to make that data more useful for students, families, educators, advocates, and policymakers. Our state needs a strong backbone of secure data covering the student's education journey to aid in making the best policy decisions for our future. Our proposal is to create an education and workforce data governing board made up of agency directors and stakeholders representing the education and workforce pipeline. This governing board would provide leadership-level direction of Ohio's data system in a coordinated, secure, and transparent manner. The charge of the governing board will be to:
  - Support critical education and workforce policies such as performance-based funding for higher education connected to employment outcomes, and measuring return on investment for various programs.
  - Coordinate the creation of tools, dashboards, and reports that students, families, stakeholders, and policymakers can use to make informed decisions.
  - Increase the capacity of the data system to securely process access and research requests.
  - Create a cross-agency research agenda to better align efforts researchers with the policy goals of the state.
3. **Establish a Statewide High School Internship Program:** Real-world experience for students is invaluable. The coalition is proposing a new High School Internship Program, which would facilitate paid internships for high school students. The program will connect students with employers and provide critical hands-on learning experiences, not to mention the social capital they may need to propel their futures forward. This program is modeled off of the successful Ohio Tech Internship program supported by Third Frontier funding. The High School Internship Program would help more students and be broader in scope than just tech-related positions.

### **We Need Middle and High School Transformation**

While these recommendations help build a more career-connected learning environment, one area we'd caution against at this time is any revising of Ohio's graduation requirements. It's time we thoroughly evaluate current course structures, competency benchmarks, and readiness standards expected of our students. A careful analysis will ensure that any changes effectively reengage and empower students in their education and best prepare them for the evolving demands of the workplace.

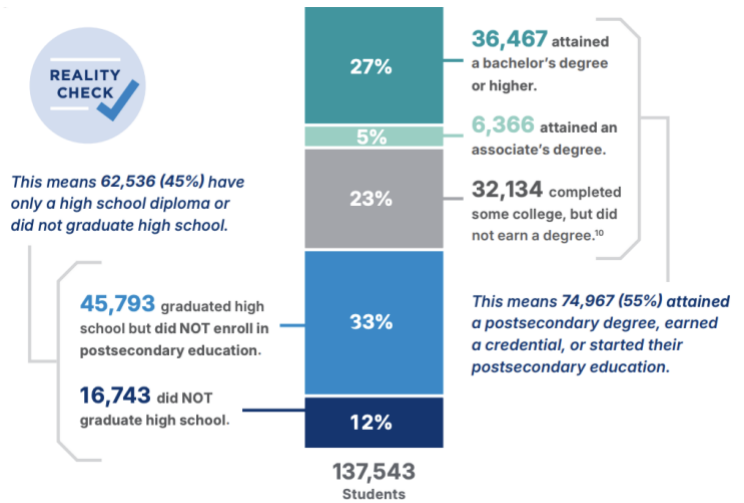
**The Time to Act is Now:** Ohio has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform how we prepare students for life beyond high school. By building on the positive steps taken in this budget and implementing the Coalition's recommendations, we are making moves to ensure every student graduates not just with a diploma, but with a plan, a purpose, and a pathway to success. This sets the table for a deeper conversation about making the middle and high school experience as impactful for students' futures as possible. We look forward to continuing those conversations with you in the future. Thank you for your time, and we welcome any questions.

# Expanding Career-Connected Learning and Career Pathways in Ohio: A Vision for 2025 and Beyond

As Ohio looks toward a more competitive and innovative future, it is clear that we must rethink the middle and high school experience. Not enough schools and districts are providing career connected learning opportunities for their students, causing students to miss essential opportunities to connect their educational experiences to viable career paths in Ohio. Our proposed 2025 Career-Connected Learning Recommendations aim to provide steps toward transforming the education system in Ohio, putting students at the center of their learning, to better equip them with the knowledge and skills, connections, experiences, and direction that will prepare them for success in Ohio's workforce and in life.

## Reality Check: The High School Experience as a Last Formal Education Stop for Many

The [Reality Check report](#) from Ohio Excels reveals a concerning trend. Of the 137,543 students in Ohio's graduating Class of 2017, 45% (62,536) exited Ohio's education system prior to high school graduation or education beyond high school. This statistic underscores a crucial reality: **for nearly half of Ohio's students, high school was their last formal education stop before entering the workforce.** For these students, expanding career-connected learning is essential to their future success, economic self-sustainability, and to Ohio's competitiveness.



## The Imperative for Transformation in Education



As Ohio's economy grows and diversifies, fueled by investments from companies like Intel, Google, and Honda-LG, and factors like declining population - demand for skilled workers continues to rise. Ohio currently has over 100,000 job openings that pay \$50,000<sup>1</sup> or more, with projections indicating that 66% of jobs by 2031<sup>2</sup> will require postsecondary education or credentials. Despite this demand, many high school graduates are not prepared for these opportunities. To bridge this gap, **Ohio's**

**education system must adapt by emphasizing career-connected learning and high-quality career pathways.**

## Career-Connected Learning

Career-connected learning refers to educational experiences that help students understand their interests and aptitudes, link their studies with real-world careers, and help them see their future job opportunities. This approach includes activities like career exploration, career coaching, and career pathway options. The goal is to give students more insight into their career options and give them a head start in preparing for them. <sup>3</sup>

## High-Quality Career Pathways

High-quality career pathways are educational programs offering a sequence of academic and technical courses, work-based learning, early college options, and industry-recognized credentials aligned with industry needs. These pathways prepare students with the skills, certifications, and experiences required by employers,

<sup>1</sup> Jobs paying over \$50,000 are specifically highlighted by OhioMeansJobs.com: <https://ohiomeansjobs.ohio.gov/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections\\_2031-State-Report.pdf](https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections_2031-State-Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's Career Connections Framework](#)

supported by partnerships between schools, postsecondary institutions, and employers to facilitate smooth transitions into the workforce or further education. Designed to support entry and advancement within specific fields, these pathways equip students for both initial employment and long-term career growth, providing employers with a skilled talent pipeline and the state with the human capital needed for a thriving economy.

## 2025 Career-Connected Learning Recommendations

Led by Ohio Excels, a diverse group of career education stakeholders formed a coalition to identify key policy pillars to guide Ohio's transformation efforts.

Pillar	Goal	Key Policies
<b>Middle School Career Exploration</b>	All students receive high-quality career exposure, coaching, and planning before high school that helps guide them to and through high school graduation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Require explicit career exploration and coaching in middle school, through a new course or course equivalent.</li> <li>2. Develop a state Framework for Quality Career Coaching.</li> <li>3. Evaluate the effectiveness of existing Career Awareness and Exploration funds.</li> </ol>
<b>Work-Based Learning</b>	Expand equitable access to high-quality Work-Based Learning opportunities to enhance career awareness and readiness.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Expand incentive funding for employers participating in high-quality work-based learning to encourage them to work with more Ohio students.</li> </ol>
<b>In-Demand Credentials</b>	Ensure that state incentives are promoting the earning of industry credentials that are valued by employers to ensure future student success and alignment to workforce needs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Replace the current credential point system with a three-tiered system based on value to industry &amp; employers, and employment outcomes for students.</li> <li>2. Expand the Innovative Workforce Incentive Program funding to ensure schools are receiving full incentive payments.</li> </ol>
<b>Workforce Outcomes</b>	Ensure transparency and continuous improvement in Ohio's education system by tracking and reporting outcomes for graduates, using data to inform policies and practices, and providing accessible insights to the public.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create user-friendly data tools, like dashboards and reports, for stakeholders to access pathway ROI and outcomes, supporting data-driven decisions and public transparency.</li> <li>2. Create a cross-agency governing board to oversee a data system connecting education and workforce data.</li> <li>3. Ensure the College, Career, Military, and Workforce Readiness measure on the state report card is rated so that schools and districts prioritize these experiences.</li> </ol>
<b>Expanding Career-Technical Education</b>	Expand opportunities for more students to be exposed to and enroll in high-quality Career-Technical Education programs aligned with industry needs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Phase out the 7th &amp; 8th Grade Waiver that allows schools to opt-out of CTE, ensuring courses are available to all middle school students.</li> <li>2. Define the role of Career-Tech Planning Districts (CTPDs) across Ohio to ensure equitable access to high-quality career-technical education (CTE) for all students.</li> </ol>

### Coalition Endorsements:

Alliance for High Quality Education, ExcelinEd, Greater Cleveland Career Consortium, Learn to Earn Dayton, Ohio Association of Career-Technical Educators, Ohio Farm Bureau, Ohio Federation of Teachers, Sean P. Dunn & Associates, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and Ohio Excels. The Ohio Departments of Education & Workforce and Higher Education are active coalition members.

### Looking Ahead

To fully realize Ohio's vision for career-connected learning for all students, we must provide the necessary resources and support structures to students, families, educators, and employers alike. These recommendations aim to lay the foundation for this transformation of our K-12 education system over the next two biennial budgets.