IN BRIEF

How State Policy Can Transform Career Navigation for Young People: A 50-State Analysis

The Challenge

Few young people have access to the essential career navigation services they need to make informed decisions about their education and career options after high school.

What's wrong? **Today's education-to-career ecosystem is too complex to navigate.** Existing services are scattered across K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, workforce development, industry, and community organizations, and most states lack a supportive policy infrastructure to help make critical connections.

The gaps leave career navigation professionals unable to meaningfully collaborate, align their supports, or improve the quality of their services. **This leaves young adults without the information, guidance, or learning and work opportunities they need to pursue their career goals.**

Why Career Navigation Matters

10.9% of young people ages 16-24 are not in school and not working. That's 4.3 million young people.
Source: Measure of America, 2024

The youth unemployment rate is **12.9%** for 16-to-19-year-olds and **8.3%** for 20-to-24-year-olds.
Source: Federal Research Economic Database, 2025

72% **of employers** don't see a college degree as a reliable assessment of applicants' skills yet **52% of employers** still hire applicants from degree programs.
Source: Morning Consult Survey for JFF, 2025

The Solution

All 50 states should aim to develop a policy environment that supports aligned, integrated, and comprehensive career navigation services across education, workforce, and related systems. This is a critical way to help young people access key information, use available financial support, and pursue pathways that are meaningfully connected to their chosen career.

The ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF helps young people ages 16-24 find, evaluate, access, and pay for high-quality education and training programs while helping employers identify workers with skills that match their needs.

To learn more about the center's policy work, email Erica Cuevas at ecuevas@jff.org.

To develop an effective career navigation system for young people, each state's policymakers should focus on four key areas:

Actionable information

Every young person needs access to high-quality information about postsecondary education and career opportunities to help them make informed choices about their future.

Work-based learning

These opportunities bridge the gap between education and employment by providing young people with hands-on experience and skills that are directly applicable in the workplace.

Personalized guidance

Young people can work with career coaches to clarify their goals, acquire critical skills, and choose from available postsecondary education and training programs.

Short-term credentials

These pathways can rapidly equip young people with skills needed to meet the demands of a dynamic job market and secure credentials valued by employers.

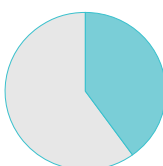## State Progress in Advancing Career Navigation

We identified 19 policies across the 4 components above that are essential for supporting effective career navigation services. They include quality standards, cross-sector partnerships, financial incentives, clear service definitions, and more. Few states have made significant progress in adopting these policies. Our scan of all 50 states' policies revealed the following:

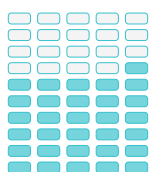### Limited Adoption of Key Policies

Few states **(Iowa, Maryland, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington)** have adopted a majority of the policies that contribute to a comprehensive career navigation system.
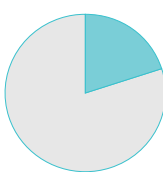
Advancements in Funding and Incentives

Some of the most common policies, which more than **40%** of states have adopted, involve increasing state funding and financial incentives for work-based learning opportunities and short-term credentials.

Incomplete Utilization of Policy Components

Most states have not yet enacted the full range of policies available to them to support the development of an effective career navigation system; **31 states have adopted only 6 or fewer policies.**

Gaps in Policy Implementation

The least common policies, which **20% or fewer states** have adopted, codify quality standards for career navigation activities, incentivize cross-system partnerships, and ensure robust data analysis.

How much progress has your state made in adopting policies that support a comprehensive career navigation system for young people?
To learn more, read our full report: *How State Policy Can Transform Career Navigation for Young People: A 50-State Analysis.*