



In-Demand Career Pathways and High-Priority Occupations

The Southern Regional Education Board's Commission on Career Pathways and Credentials, chaired by Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, has brought together experts from each of SREB's 16 states, including leadership from governors' offices and state agencies, K-12 superintendents, principals and teachers, postsecondary deans and faculty members, and business leaders. The commission members are investigating and sharing promising practices from across the region and using their collective expertise to identify common solutions to shared challenges.

The commission, which began its work in January 2025, is developing recommendations for:

- Using labor market data to guide decision making.
- Designating a state agency or special council to collaborate with employers, secondary and postsecondary education agencies, and workforce investment boards to establish common definitions for high-demand, high-skilled and high-wage careers.
- Creating criteria for identifying high demand career pathways and approving industry-certification examinations and technical skill assessments that are part of a system of stackable credentials.

This policy brief is the first of several publications to be produced by the commission.

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Why States Benefit by Identifying Priority Occupations and Careers

Workforce development resources are limited; thus, decisions must be made about the allocation of the resources that are available. State-developed and -approved lists of priority occupations and careers can be used to **inform** agencies of state and regional priorities, **influence** education decision making, and **incentivize** the collaboration of agencies that strengthen talent pipelines.

The U.S. is facing a shortage of 6 million workers over the next eight years across health care, skilled trades, manufacturing and services. Simultaneously, the country has 4.4 million opportunity youth — Americans ages 16-24 who are in neither education nor the workforce (amounting to 11% of that age group). Unemployment rates for Americans 55+ are also high, suggesting that older workers who have been displaced by automation or IT are having difficulty finding jobs they need as they approach retirement. This data suggests misalignment, inefficiencies and significant drags on local and national economies. According to the Center for American Progress's 2024 Workforce Development State Strategies report, priority occupation lists can be a critical tool in correcting these misalignments.

State leadership's involvement in the identification of priority career pathways leads to the **efficient allocation of resources**. By identifying occupations that are both in demand and offer family-sustaining wages, states can prioritize funding for training programs that will address the needs of the local workforce. [Pennsylvania's High Priority Occupations list](#) serves this purpose by aligning workforce training and education investments with occupations that have higher skill needs and are most likely to provide family-sustaining wages.

Priority lists **can align education and workforce training with labor market needs**. States like Georgia and Pennsylvania use high-demand career lists to synchronize educational programs with employer requirements. [Georgia's High Demand Career List](#), for instance, guides improvements in education and job training programs, ensuring they meet industry standards and effectively prepare students for in-demand careers.

Priority lists also **support economic development and talent retention**. In states like [South Carolina](#), developing and promoting high-demand career pathways is crucial for attracting and retaining a skilled workforce, particularly in sectors like manufacturing, aerospace, agribusiness, automotive and technology. Efforts include creating innovation corridors and strengthening partnerships between businesses and educational institutions to cultivate local talent pools.

States benefit from priority lists by growing their economies and tax bases and by efficiently allocating public resources. Business, industry and employers benefit by being able to hire the workers they need. **Individual learners and workers also benefit through enhanced career awareness and guidance**, and being able to know when they pursue education or job training that their **preparation is likely to get them hired, paid well and retained over the long-term**.

High-demand career lists serve as valuable tools for career counseling and guidance, helping students and job seekers make informed decisions about their educational and career paths. For example, Colorado's career pathway initiatives provide clear sequences of stackable credits and credentials, enabling individuals to secure industry-relevant skills and advance in high-demand occupations.

Over the years, states have passed legislation to address critical worker shortages in specific areas. For example, in recent years, one state passed four different pieces of legislation to address its healthcare workforce, education workforce, manufacturing workforce and advanced technology workforce. While these efforts have been laudable, addressing each sector of the workforce independently is a fragmented approach and can lead to unaddressed gaps.

In comparison, Georgia recently passed HB 982 establishing a comprehensive approach to prioritizing career pathways and occupations across all regions of the states and across all sectors of its economy. Many other states in the SREB region have also adopted comprehensive approaches to identifying priority occupations. While we highlight the approaches of Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina in this policy brief, there are countless other good examples produced by SREB states.

Recommendations for Identifying In-Demand Career Pathways and Priority Occupations

Commission members identified five recommendations for identifying in-demand pathways and the related occupations in the region. The recommendations are intended to assist states as they hold cross-agency discussions and develop in-demand lists that guide pathway development and implementation. The recommendations include key strategies and a call to action.

Recommendation 1: Establish Cross-Agency Collaboration and Governance to Drive Career Pathways Success

For career pathways initiatives to be sustainable, effective and impactful, states must establish clear governance structures, leadership accountability and cross-agency coordination. Without a lead agency and formalized coordination, efforts can become fragmented, and resources may be underutilized. To ensure career pathways remain aligned with workforce needs states should establish formal employer engagement mechanisms.

Call to Action

To ensure career pathways remain a statewide priority, states are encouraged to:

- Obtain executive support from the governor's office to prioritize career pathways alignment across agencies.
- Empower a lead agency with authority to drive collaboration and ensure accountability.
- Formally establish a Career Pathways Coordinating Council to align efforts across education, workforce and economic development agencies.
- Set statewide career pathways priorities that remain consistent across agencies, regions and initiatives.

Action Steps

To ensure a cohesive statewide career pathways strategy, states can:

- Secure governor-level leadership and commitment to workforce alignment.
- Designate a lead agency to facilitate data-sharing, policy alignment and program coordination.
- Form a State Career Pathways Coordinating Council with representatives from the education, workforce and economic development agencies as well as employers to drive a unified strategy. If the council includes legislators, the representation should be bipartisan.
- Publish an annual action plan outlining statewide priorities, strategies and workforce alignment efforts.
- Clearly communicate the goals and purpose of the Career Pathways Coordinating Council.
- Invite employers to become engaged members of the Career Pathways Coordinating Council to better prepare learners to meet workforce needs.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen Industry Engagement and Develop a Common Statewide Definition of High-Quality Career Pathways

To create a seamless and effective career pathways system, states must develop a common definition of high-quality career pathways that is used consistently across all agencies and regional businesses and industries.

While each state should define high quality career pathways based on its unique workforce needs, a strong statewide definition must align with best practices, ensure coordination between secondary and postsecondary education, and provide clear connections to employment.

Call to Action

To ensure career pathways are consistently defined, aligned and effective, states must:

- Expand employer-led advisory committees to validate industry needs and information curriculum development.
- Develop a common statewide definition of high-quality career pathways that is used across all agencies and institutions.
- Ensure this definition applies to both secondary and postsecondary pathways, allowing for seamless transitions from education to employment.
- Use guiding principles to create a framework that allows flexibility while ensuring consistent, high-quality implementation.
- Engage employers, educators and workforce development leaders in defining HQCPs, ensuring that career pathways remain aligned to real workforce needs.
- Integrate accountability measures to track pathway success and make data-driven improvements over time.

Action Steps

To guarantee that industry is leading pathway discussions and all stakeholders are using common language, states take the following actions:

- Offer state tax credits or workforce training grants as a means of incentivizing industry participation.
- Require every career pathway to have an industry-driven Technical Advisory Committee that:
 - Regularly reviews program content to ensure relevance.
 - Validates credentials of value based on industry demand.
 - Guides experiential learning opportunities (internships, apprenticeships and simulated experiences)
 - Defines the role of each partner represented on the committee and their involvement in the process of defining HQCPs.
- Incorporate clear outcome metrics in the high-quality career pathway definition, making sure that pathways lead to:
 - Credential attainment (certificates, diplomas, degrees and industry certifications)
 - Employment in high-wage, high-skill jobs.
 - Career progression and wage growth over time.
 - Successful transitions between secondary, postsecondary and workforce training.

Recommendation 3: Identify, Monitor and Update Priority Occupations

To build strong career pathways that align with workforce needs, states can adopt a data-driven approach to identifying, tracking and updating priority occupations. The priority occupations list should be based on accurate, up-to-date labor market data and validated by employers to ensure alignment with workforce demands.

Additionally, states can track workforce retention, sector mobility, AI-driven labor shifts and public service workforce gaps to ensure that identified high-demand occupations lead to sustained employment and economic mobility.

Call to Action

To maximize the utility of a high-demand occupations list as an accurate workforce planning tool, states can:

- Create and maintain a cross-agency infrastructure for the management of a statewide longitudinal data system that is secure yet has an interface that produces public-facing data that can be utilized in a timely manner by policymakers, businesses, educators and the public.
- Commit to annual updates and validation by integrating employer insights and new labor market data.

- Monitor retention and mobility trends to ensure that workforce investments lead to sustainable careers.
- Ensure transparency by making data publicly available and easily understood by policymakers, educators, workforce agencies and citizens.
- Incorporate projections for emerging industries where demand is new enough to not yet appear in the data.

Action Steps

To make certain career pathways are continuously evolving to meet workforce needs states can:

1. Leverage multiple data sources to identify in-demand jobs, including:
 - Labor market information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and state workforce agencies to track employment growth rates, annual job openings and wage trends.
 - Real-time job postings data (like Lightcast or JobsEQ) to track employer demand and evolving skill requirements.
 - State wage records and unemployment insurance data to monitor job placement, earnings growth and career retention.
 - Public-service workforce data (such as education, healthcare, law enforcement or government roles) to ensure state-supported sectors are prioritized.
 - AI and emerging workforce data to track new labor trends and potential disruptions.
2. Develop and maintain a high-demand occupations list that:
 - Updates annually, using employer validation and cross-agency collaboration to ensure accuracy.
 - Differentiates between short-term and long-term workforce needs, recognizing how automation, AI and demographic shifts may impact job demand.
 - Tracks workforce retention, analyzing barriers to long-term employment and identifying sectors where trained workers leave the field.
 - Identifies priority industries for investment, ensuring that state and federal workforce funds are directed toward sustainable careers.
3. Ensure public accessibility and use of data
 - Develop public-facing dashboards and state workforce reports that make priority occupations and job trends accessible to policymakers, educators, businesses, students, and parents and guardians.
 - Train state and regional workforce agencies on how to interpret and use labor market data to guide program funding and development.
 - Encourage regional workforce boards to validate and refine the list based on local employer needs and economic conditions.

Recommendation 4: Establish Common Data Standards and Performance Metrics for Career Pathway Success

Without consistent data collection and common definitions, states cannot accurately track progress, measure impact or make informed decisions about workforce investments. To improve data transparency, accountability and cross-agency alignment, states must:

- Standardize data elements and definitions across all agencies.
- Ensure all agencies collect the same data elements to measure student and workforce outcomes.
- Define success metrics to determine the effectiveness of career pathways programs.
- Incorporate career lattices into pathway design to ensure skill transferability across industries.

Call to Action

To ensure data consistency, accuracy and impact measurement, states must:

- Define common terminology and standard data elements across all agencies.
- Ensure all agencies track and report career pathways outcomes using consistent metrics.
- Align outcome metrics with workforce goals, ensuring that training programs lead to employment, economic mobility and career advancement.
- Integrate career lattices into career pathways design to ensure students gain transferable skills for long-term career success.

Action Steps

To confirm alignment across agencies, states can:

- Develop a statewide career pathways data framework with common data elements providing consistency across agencies.
- Establish data-sharing agreements between education, workforce and economic development agencies.
- Track long-term career outcomes, such as:
 - Postsecondary enrollment and credential attainment
 - Employment rates and wage growth
 - Retention in career pathways fields (measuring workforce persistence over time)
 - Transferability of skills across industries (career lattices)
 - Employer satisfaction and job placement rates.

Recommendation 5: Ensure the Effective Use of the Priority Occupations List Across State Systems

A high-demand occupations list is only valuable if it is actively used to shape education and workforce investments, inform decision-making, and create career opportunities. SREB states can use labor market data to guide funding, program development, training incentives and career exploration efforts, thereby driving economic growth and workforce success.

Additionally, state agencies can collaborate to maximize financial and human capital resources, ensuring that the priority occupations list is a core tool in education and workforce strategy.

Call to Action

The high-demand occupations list can be a tool that actively informs education and workforce decisions. States can use this tool so that:

- Labor market data is embedded into career guidance, workforce training and education program approval processes.
- State agencies and workforce development boards align funding and initiatives with in-demand career fields.
- Financial incentives encourage employer participation and students have access to training and career pathways.
- Employers, educators and policymakers work collaboratively to build a responsive and future-ready workforce.

Action Steps

To make certain the priority occupations list is widely understood and used, states should:

- Embed career pathway data into advisement programs to help students and job seekers make informed career choices.
- Prioritize state and federal workforce funds (Perkins, WIOA, apprenticeship grants) in support of high-demand jobs.
- Support secondary schools, postsecondary institutions and workforce training providers in the use of labor market data to guide the approval, modification and elimination of programs.
- Offer financial incentives, including competitive grants and state funding for innovative programs in priority occupations.

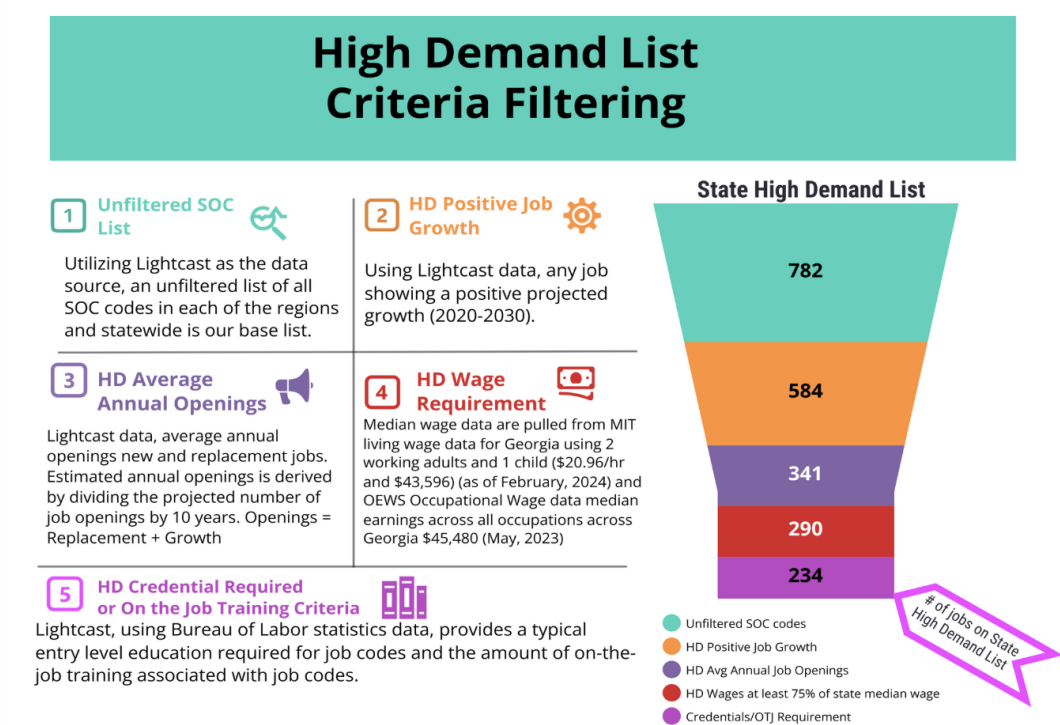
How SREB States Are Using Their High Demand Career Lists

There is no one best way to use high demand career lists. Beginning in 2022, Georgia has used its list to identify pathways and industries for its High Demand Apprenticeship Program. Under this program, employers can access up to \$50,000 in state funding to develop qualifying apprenticeships. In Tennessee, the state’s high-demand list has been used with the Governor’s Investment in Vocational Education program to direct \$25 million to create career pathway partnerships between high schools, technical colleges and industry. And in South Carolina, the state’s Workforce Scholarships for the Future help students earn credentials in manufacturing, healthcare, IT, transportation and construction. There is more than one way to use the lists once they have been developed, but they must be developed and current to be useful.

Priority Occupations Snapshot: Georgia

Following the passage of HB 982, Georgia used a five-step process to develop its high demand career list.

1. Establish a base list using Lightcast to identify SOC codes, or Standard Occupational Classification codes. This identified 782 codes in the workforce across the state.
2. Using Lightcast, identify jobs with positive growth projected for 2020-2030. This narrowed the list to 584 codes.
3. Filter by the projection for average annual openings. This narrowed the list to 341 codes.
4. Filter for high wages, defined as \$20.96 hourly/\$43,596 annually. This narrowed the list to 290 codes.
5. Filter for jobs that require high-demand credentials. This last step resulted in a final list of 234 codes.



Priority Occupations Snapshot: South Carolina

South Carolina narrowed its list of over 800 occupations down to 168 priority occupations by gathering objective data and using a weighted formula. Each occupation receives a score, 40% of which is based on current demand, measured by the number of job openings; 20% is based on future growth over 10 years, measured as a percentage relative to current positions; 20% is based on financial viability, measured by median wage for that occupation in South Carolina; and 20% is based on retention and on annual turnover, with lower turnover ranked higher. This algorithmic approach is understandable, justifiable, transparent and replicable.

Using this formula, every career cluster had at least two priority occupations, and the career cluster with the greatest demand had 24 priority occupations. To assist job seekers and students, South Carolina has identified typical education levels for entry level positions within each occupation, and the state is developing a web app that will help job seekers identify priority occupations and education and experience requirements to enter and advance within those occupations.

Priority Occupations Snapshot: Alabama

The Alabama Committee on Credentialing and Career Pathways identifies high demand occupations for the state. The Alabama legislature created ACCCP in Act 2019-506 during the 2019 session. The purpose of the ACCCP is (1) to identify Alabama's regional and statewide in-demand occupations, and (2) to identify competency models, career pathways, and credentials of value linked to those in-demand occupations. The ACCCP includes 16 technical advisory committees, each with seven representatives of business and industry appointed to the committees by the governor.

The ACCCP analyzes labor market data including the Alabama Terminal on Linking and Analyzing Statistics on Career Pathways to identify high demand occupations and career pathways. They use a "five-star rubric" to evaluate occupations on five criteria in each workforce region of the state. To make the in-demand list for each region, an occupation must pay at least 70% of the regional median wage; have positive job growth; and have at least 15 openings in the region.

The occupation must also meet a higher wage requirement **OR** require a postsecondary credential to make the regional in-demand occupation list. Occupations identified as in-demand in three or more regions are then placed on the statewide in-demand occupations list.

Each TAC is also responsible for developing competency models and career pathways with the support of subject-matter experts from state education and workforce agencies.

Summary

SREB's Commission on Career Pathways and Credentials believes creating a list of in-demand career pathways and related occupations will assist states in setting clear expectations for a unified education and workforce system. The recommendations of the commission support a common vision and set of priorities and policies to guide state agencies and encourage collaboration. They ensure shared accountability for outcomes across all education and workforce development entities.

Commission members agreed that the sustainability of career pathway efforts requires support from the governor. The governor must appoint a lead agency to facilitate the collaboration of all agencies that address education and workforce development. One of the first actions of the cross-agency team is the creation of common definitions related to high-quality pathways. The definition must apply to all levels of education and training. The cross-agency team's work must be data driven. Thus, the sharing of data among agencies is important. With data sharing comes a standardization of data elements.

The list of in-demand career pathways and occupations is valuable information for learners at all levels. It can guide career planning, course selection and extended learning opportunities.

References

Goodman, V., Otero Martinez, T., and Andara, K. (2024). *Workforce Development State Strategies: A 50-State Scan of Best Practices from Recent Action*. Center for American Progress.

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