ILLINOIS EDUCATION AND CAREER SUCCESS NETWORK

September 24, 2025

MEMO

Addressing Challenges to College and Career Pathway Endorsement Implementation

From April through June 2025, the Illinois Education and Career Success Network Policy Committee convened a statewide working group of practitioners to uncover and address some of the most pressing challenges to College and Career Pathway Endorsement (CCPE) implementation in high schools across Illinois. The workgroup, comprised of more than 40 practitioners from varying geographies across the state, shared insights via written survey and workgroup discussions. CCPE's four-pronged framework, including individual planning, academic readiness, professional learning, and career-focused instruction provides students with a comprehensive suite of activities accelerating them forward in the pathways of their choosing.

The 2016 Postsecondary & Workforce Readiness Act (PWR) Act ignited a statewide push to ensure students are ready for life after high school, introducing the Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) framework, CCPE system, transitional instruction to reduce the need for postsecondary remediation, and a pilot of competency-based education models. Building on the PWR Act, HB3296 set a July 2025 deadline for districts serving any of grades 9-12 to apply to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to offer CCPE in at least one endorsement area or to opt-out by board decision. With this deadline for districts in mind, the Policy Committee convened a statewide workgroup of secondary, postsecondary and intermediary leaders to identify barriers to implementation and explore local- and system-level solutions. This report outlines the challenges the workgroup explored and highlights recommendations to address those core challenges.

Table of Contents

Key Findings.....3

Addressing Systemic Challenges.....4

Innovative Local Strategies.....6

Conclusion & Next Steps 7

Launched in December 2022, the Illinois Education and Career Success Network's Policy Committee provides space for local practitioners and policy leaders to collaborate and learn from one another, elevates local practice to inform Illinois state policy, and supports local practitioners in taking advantage of policy windows. Composed of a range of education, workforce, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and state agency stakeholders spanning the P-20 pipeline, the Policy Committee offers a useful venue for these conversations.

Key Findings

Challenges of CCPE Implementation

- The **CCPE approval process** can impede momentum in program implementation, particularly for applicants' team-based challenges.
- Successful CCPE programming depends on **industry and postsecondary partnerships**, which are challenging to establish and maintain.
- CCPE success hinges on **seamless operations**, from student transportation and scheduling of career development experiences to individual planning and data collection.
- **Resource constraints and implementation challenges impact equitable student access** to CCPE, and unpaid work-based learning opportunities compound access challenges for low-income students in particular.

Recommendations to Improve CCPE Implementation

Systems-Level Recommendations

1. **Simplify the CCPE approval process** with a multi-year approval timeline and alignment to other approval systems such as Career and Technical Education (CTE).
2. **Provide resources and materials to facilitate partnerships**, such as a model business partnership template and funds for student wages, school-based career development experiences (CDEs), and dual credit credentialing in key pathways.
3. **Adjust operations of CCPE to enhance equity and efficiency** such as flexibility within the 60-hour CDE requirement and a portability code for CCPE completers.
4. **Expand equity of access to CCPE programming** with student-centered currency and statewide, comprehensive evaluation of student access and participation.

Local-Level Recommendations

5. In facilitating partnerships, consider a **continuum approach** for industry participation and convene multiple partners to create **shared vision and goals**.
6. **Streamline operations across pathways** by starting with what you have, creating district- or school-wide templates for team-based challenges (TBCs), exploring school-based CDEs, and taking advantage of new state policy to use school buses for CDE transportation.
7. **Harness student engagement** to spark pathway development with student-centered currency in high-demand pathways.

Addressing Systemic Challenges

Many of the challenges surfaced by the workgroup are common across communities in different contexts, opening a window to consider statewide solutions that meet the needs of many communities. Over four sessions in school year 2024–25, the workgroup considered ways that ISBE and other state agencies and leaders could shift systems, provide resources, and address core barriers to implementation for schools and districts. The workgroup recommends the following system-level policy solutions:

PRIORITY 1

Simplify the CCPE approval process.

Challenge: Workgroup members describe a frustrating and cumbersome CCPE state approval process, which slows implementation momentum, discourages further pathway development, and sometimes dissuades district leaders from applying for approval even where they are offering robust pathway opportunities to their students. For ISBE, the implementation deadline creates an influx of new district applications for approval, the volume of which may be challenging to manage when they are also balancing district submissions for CTE and other programming.

Recommendations: To optimize the approval process for both district applicants and agency staff, workgroup members envision a multi-year approval timeline. At two to three years, this multi-year approval would reduce application volume at the state agency level and thus enable more efficient and personalized feedback for the school level. Given recent improvements to the approval system, such as one-click rollover, an annual checkpoint would still offer an opportunity to apply a continuous improvement lens to approved endorsements while ensuring key organizational information, such as contact information, is kept up-to-date.

Workgroup members also voiced support to integrate the CCPE submission into existing data platforms for CTE to streamline systems for both agency and districts.

PRIORITY 2

Provide resources and materials to facilitate partnerships.

Challenge: Implementers highlighted the critical importance of identifying postsecondary and industry partnerships for successful CCPE programming, but voiced difficulty in securing those partnerships. Difficulties include availability of employer partners (especially for rural districts), lack of clear messaging materials to communicate the value of CCPE to business partners, and tight budgets making transportation and educator dual credit credentialing difficult.

Recommendations: Industry and postsecondary partnerships are critical components of successful CCPE programs but can be the most difficult to establish and maintain. Workgroup members suggested creating a model business partnership template for districts that contains standard language for facilitating career development experiences with industry firms and professionals. Further, existing community partnership efforts from state agencies, such as the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC), can be leveraged to support employer connections for districts, particularly in rural areas.

Targeted funding to support districts could significantly expand the range of districts implementing CCPE. Microgrants could be deployed to address district pain points and scale opportunities for students, such as school-based or virtual career development opportunities for schools with limited employer partners, transportation to employer partners, and subsidies for wages for these experiences if otherwise unpaid. Further, to improve postsecondary partnerships for dual credit, districts need funding to credential educators in priority career pathway courses.

Other creative solutions put forth by the workgroup include establishing a CCPE module for new businesses within the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) and Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation (IDFPR) licensure processes to increase industry partner awareness and cultivate engagement.

PRIORITY 3

Adjust operations of CCPE to enhance equity and efficiency.

Challenge: From workplace transportation to individual planning and dual credit, the many details of operationalizing CCPE can prove burdensome to pathway cultivation. Seamless operations are critical to ensure a positive student experience across the four component areas of CCPE.

Recommendations: Among the many moving parts of work-based learning experiences, the 60-hour requirement for career development experiences (CDE) has proven challenging for schools to implement and for students to access. Despite some states having higher time requirements, including Indiana (75 hours[1]) and Ohio (250 hours[2]), the 60-hour threshold can be prohibitive for students who may otherwise want to pursue CCPE but cannot afford to take on unpaid work. While maintaining the statewide consistency and integrity of the 60-hour requirement, workgroup members recommend considering strategic opportunities for flexibility. This could include recognition of a CDE at a lower threshold of hours that culminates in an industry credential (e.g., 40 hours for a Certified Nursing Assistant credential), or a competency-based model that allows for students to learn and track key workforce readiness skills in their part time work, such as Rockford's program of career coaching within students' existing employment.

Workgroup members noted that statewide counselor shortages curtailed efforts to provide timely and relevant advising in CCPE but pointed to the potential for ISACorps to support advising, in alignment with their existing PaCE support efforts, as a natural link to student postsecondary life. In addition to catalyzing the ISACorps to reach more than 100,000 students per year in their pathway planning, ISAC can support the training and professional development of school-based counselors and staff to provide students with relevant guidance in exploring CCPE opportunities.

Finally, to streamline the transfer of operations from secondary to postsecondary, CCPE practitioners ideated a portability code for CCPE completers, similar to those used statewide for transitional instruction. This would mean that colleges across Illinois would be able to more seamlessly offer benefits to CCPE earners, from scholarships to placement into programs that support them along the same career pathway.

---

1 Work and Learn Indiana. (n.d.). *The work and learn resource hub*. www.workandlearnindiana.com/wbl

2 Ohio Department of Education. (2020, October). *Ohio work-based learning pathway options*. education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Career-Tech/Career-Connections/Work-Based-Learning/Ohio-Work-Based-Learning.pdf

PRIORITY 4

Center student needs to ensure more equitable CCPE participation and outcomes.

Challenge: Despite the multitude of benefits emerging from student participation in CCPE and its component parts, workgroup stakeholders expressed a desire to expand available currency across the state for endorsement earners so that these students have tangible benefits after they leave high school. Workgroup members shared that they believe this will help motivate students to participate and would improve the value proposition for school and district leaders to scale implementation

Recommendations: A critical aspect of the CCPE framework is the acceleration into college and career upon its completion, but far too many pathways lack a tangible result for students other than the endorsement seal on their diplomas and acquisition of new skills and competencies. Thus, it is critical to enable colleges and industry partners to create student-centered currency by providing guidance and targeted funds. For example, some colleges such as Joliet Junior College and Illinois Valley Community College offer one-course tuition waivers for CCPE completers, while Shawnee Community College offers health sciences and technology CCPE earners additional points toward their entry to the nursing program plus a waiver for the relevant entrance exam. Despite the promise of these ad-hoc approaches, practitioners emphasize the importance of creating consistent, statewide currency that is student-centered in order to build widespread student awareness and interest, building on ongoing currency development efforts by Network Organizers ISAC and Education Systems Center (EdSystems) at Northern Illinois University.

To build on implementation successes and facilitate further scaling of CCPE statewide, a comprehensive evaluation is necessary. A robust evaluation would demonstrate the impacts of programming on students and highlight opportunities to improve the policy and practice in service of student success. Aspects of the evaluation could include student participation data, pathway availability across districts, employer partnerships, dual credit partnerships, and district participation by funding adequacy. This insight would both ensure CCPE scaling is on the right track and deliver actionable learnings to apply in marketing CCPE to industry and postsecondary partners.

Innovative Local Strategies

While advancing statewide policy improvement is essential, the workgroup also highlighted promising local practices to address pressing implementation challenges for districts as well. These strategies, when scaled, have the potential to transform pathways opportunities for students statewide.

PRIORITY 5

Focus on partnerships as the foundation of strong CCPE programming.

Challenge: Establishing and maintaining industry and postsecondary partnerships can be challenging in raising partner awareness, cultivating trust, and co-creating quality career development experiences for students.

Recommendations: As a workgroup member from a large suburban district implementing CCPE shared, “This is the work of shifting human systems.” While some partners may be unfamiliar with the

pathways approach blending high school, career, and postsecondary planning, consider a continuum approach for industry participation in work-based learning at varying degrees of commitment. EdSystems has examples of this approach for education, health sciences, IT, and manufacturing.

To build synergy across industry, secondary and postsecondary, workgroup members recommend bringing multiple partners to the table to create shared vision and goals. EdSystems' Career Development Experience Toolkit provides inspiration for how to do this throughout the design and implementation of a student experience.

PRIORITY 6

Streamline operations across pathways by starting with what you have existing strength and capacity in and building from there.

Challenge: Operations, from funding to transportation and scheduling, have proven challenging for practitioners to master at the scale required to enable CCPE access for all students.

Recommendations: To lift the onus of CCPE planning from teachers' busy plates, a workgroup member and suburban Education for Employment career coordinator described utilizing her regional role to take on logistical challenges and allow teachers to focus on creative pedagogy for pieces like team-based challenges. Similarly, another suburban implementer noted the use of a district-wide team-based challenge template for schools to have a plug-and-play resource to use with industry partners, alleviating the pressure of creating new resources from scratch. In addition, this workgroup member said embedding these team-based challenges within students' curriculum in 9th and 10th grade years ensured access for all students, sparking engagement with pathways work as they planned for their upperclassmen years.

Transportation was raised as a prohibitive factor for many districts to establish career development experiences at employer sites, particularly in rural regions. Some workgroup members lifted up the idea of school-based career development experiences where local employers may be scarce. For example, the Collinsville Area Vocational Center uses this innovative approach to embed career development experiences within school-based enterprises such as automotive and food service. District leaders may also consider how a new amendment to the Illinois Vehicle Code to allow school bus transportation for college and career readiness activities may support transportation for students to and from career development experiences.

PRIORITY 7

Harness student engagement to spark pathway development.

Challenge: While CCPE experiences empower students to dream beyond the typical secondary experience and envision fulfilling college and career trajectories, these opportunities are often limited to well-resourced districts and students therein.

Recommendations: Workgroup members reported heightened student attendance and enthusiasm for hands-on, relevant career activities, and recommended others survey their own students to gauge interest and prioritize pathways in those fields. In that vein, workgroup members emphasized the need for student-centered currency that can inspire and reward CCPE completers beyond the seals on their diplomas. As an example of how to do this, EdSystems student apprentice Massillon Boyd conducted research in his high school on perceptions and currency for the CCPE.

Conclusion & Next Steps

CCPE implementation is “the work of shifting human systems” and comes with myriad challenges on district, campus, and student levels. With these challenges comes the opportunity for local creativity and innovation. While this local approach leaves room for district autonomy and context-specific strategy, statewide expansion of CCPE implementation also necessitates comprehensive, systems-level action. The Policy Committee CCPE workgroup emerged to identify the intersection of promising local practice and the need for systemic reform.

To advance the system-level policy recommendations included in this memo, the Success Network Policy Committee is eager to continue collaboration with the state’s education and workforce agencies. The Policy Committee will also continue to socialize the challenges and solutions raised by the workgroup in public forums, such as presenting at ISAC’s College Changes Everything Conference in July 2025, as well as continuing to work through the committee. We encourage local leaders in this space to consider implementing the highlighted local strategies, advocate for systemic solutions, and continue robust discussion on improving CCPE implementation for the benefit of students statewide.