

April 2, 2026

MEMO

Recommendations for the New State Attainment Working Group

Response to Executive Order 2026-03 from the Illinois Education & Career Success Network

The Illinois Education and Career Success Network (“Success Network”) celebrates Governor Pritzker’s Executive Order 2026-03, which builds on more than 15 years of work in Illinois to drive toward the state’s previous postsecondary attainment goal of 60 percent by 2025 and establishes an interagency working group to develop and recommend a new statewide postsecondary attainment goal for 2040 that both focuses on credentials of value and promotes economic mobility for Illinoisans.

A new postsecondary attainment vision can illuminate how statewide and local leaders can work together to advance postsecondary attainment and economic mobility for Illinoisans, regardless of their background. In particular, we celebrate the Governor’s call for a deep examination of existing goals and plans to identify opportunities to better align and advance goals across agencies and throughout the preschool-to-college (i.e., P-20) pipeline, and for the implementation of engagement of cross-sector stakeholders who are broadly representative of perspectives and roles across our education and workforce systems.

This memo highlights key lessons we have learned as statewide conveners dedicated to supporting postsecondary attainment for over 13 years, emerging priorities from Success Network members, and recommendations for the working group to consider as they commence their efforts.

Success Network Background

In response to the P-20 Council’s 60 percent by 2025 postsecondary attainment goal, established in 2009, there was a groundswell of local work to drive attainment, despite a lack of funding for communities to support the goal. Recognizing the emergence of local initiatives across Illinois to increase postsecondary attainment and the lack of statewide support infrastructure, the Illinois 60 by 25 Network was launched in 2013 by Advance Illinois, Education Systems Center (EdSystems) at Northern Illinois University, and the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC). In 2022, the collective updated its name to the Illinois Education and Career Success Network to express its purpose and vision for 2025 and beyond.

In 2015, the network established [Leadership Communities](#) to recognize communities committed to using the organizing principles of collective impact to advance postsecondary attainment. In 2022,

the Success Network launched a [Policy Committee](#) composed of a range of education, workforce, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and state agency stakeholders spanning the P-20 pipeline. The committee meets quarterly to engage with critical questions of policy and practice and drive both policy development and implementation support statewide. For more than a decade, the Success Network has served as an essential statewide convener with deep relationships in a diverse range of communities and with state agency partners across the P-20 spectrum.

Emerging Priorities from the Field

More than 350 representatives from secondary and postsecondary education, workforce, community-based organizations, and state agencies from over 80 regions across the state joined the Success Network's [annual conference](#) on February 26, 2026, and provided input on what they would like to see in a future goal. We [captured their input](#), as well as input from the Policy Committee's March 11, 2026, meeting, and share it below for the working group to take into consideration as they begin their work.

What is your 5-10 year vision for learners in your community?

The long-term vision focuses on systemic changes that remove barriers and align education with the evolving workforce.

- **Career & Technical Education (CTE) Expansion:** A major goal is to expand CTE programs and regional centers, particularly in rural areas and southern Illinois.
- **Seamless Pathways:** The vision includes a “red-tape-free” transition between high school and college, with increased direct admissions and work-based learning integrated into college curricula.
- **Technological Fluency:** In 5–10 years, AI literacy should be embedded across all industries and skilled trades, moving students from being consumers to creators of technology.
- **Equity and Learner Agency:** The vision prioritizes closing equity gaps for Black, Brown, low-income, and rural students. Success is defined by learner agency, where learners feel empowered to construct lives that align with their specific interests and talents.
- **Affordability and Financial Sustainability:** The goal is for all students to be on a path to a living wage by age 25, graduating with minimal debt and a clear understanding of financial milestones such as the FAFSA and investing.

What do learners need to access, experience, and achieve, and why?

Participants emphasized a holistic approach to education that balances technical skills with personal well-being.

- **Access:** Learners require equitable access to career pathways and dual credit coursework led by experts. This includes modern technology, specialized resources such as TRIO programs, high-quality college and career advising grounded in future readiness, and mentorship from community and industry leaders.
- **Experience:** The consensus points toward “real-world” exposure. This includes internships, job shadowing, and hands-on learning in fields of interest. There is also a call for early exposure, starting as early as middle school or junior high.

- **Achievement:** The ultimate goal is for students to earn postsecondary credentials or degrees that unlock living wages. By grade 12, students should have a clear “E” plan (e.g. Enrolled, Enlisted, Employed, Entrepreneur, etc.).
- **Essential Skills:** Beyond academics, learners need:
 - Critical thinking and resiliency, that is, the ability to adapt to big changes.
 - Literacy, specifically in data, AI, and soft skills/employability competencies.
 - A sense of purpose, belonging, and mental health support for personal growth.

Recommendations for Translating the Goal to Impact

Given our 13 years of experience* supporting local and statewide leaders to drive toward the state’s previous postsecondary attainment goal, we have several recommendations for the working group:

RECOMMENDATION 1

Build a table of champions for goal-setting and beyond.

An inclusive vision should galvanize all sectors of Illinois’ education, workforce development, and economic development systems to see their place in providing economic mobility for all Illinoisans. While the Governor’s executive order is a starting point for developing an informed goal, to ensure this goal can be achieved, state leaders should look beyond the initial goal-setting and cultivate a table of statewide and local champions who can hold the vision and monitor and identify strategies to drive toward this vision throughout the P-20 and workforce pipeline. Uniting across education and workforce provides structured opportunities for different actors to make a difference (both statewide through interagency collaboration and locally through community teams like Leadership Communities). As part of this work, the Governor and other state leaders can play a critical role in bringing industry partners more consistently into collaboration with community and education partners. The Success Network stands poised to provide support through both our robust network of Leadership Communities and Policy Committee.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Invest in data.

Timely, quality data are essential to effective systems planning and implementation. The state should invest in robust data systems and integration to ground both initial goal-setting and continuous improvement in a sustainable way. State and local leaders need access to quality, longitudinal data to target and operationalize strategies that improve progressions through education to employment, and to evaluate where policy and programmatic interventions are generating the most impact. In particular, leaders need to better understand learners’ experiences in pursuing postsecondary credentials to drive more students into preparation strategies and to identify and address disparities in access and outcomes. As federal data infrastructure and resources continue to weaken, this is even more essential to shore up at the state level.

* For more reflections on lessons learned through the Success Network, please read “[Looking Back and Looking Forward: Outcomes of Illinois’ 60% by 2025 Postsecondary Attainment Goal and Future Direction](#)” from EdSystems.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Center equity.

One limitation of the initial 60 percent by 2025 postsecondary attainment goal was that it did not explicitly address disparate access and outcomes as a core priority for the state. Despite significant cumulative progress across a range of education and attainment measures, rates of progress have not been even across student demographics. Addressing equity gaps will take proactive, targeted, and thoughtful collaboration to address systemic barriers. We recommend that the working group analyze disparities in access and outcomes and provide clear recommendations on how state and local leaders should address them. The working group should consider and elevate the types of policy and practice frameworks and mechanisms that state and local leaders may need to operationalize more equitable systems design.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Invest in innovation and capacity.

While grounding a 2040 goal in existing plans and goals is a positive start, we have learned that the challenges community and state partners face require sustainable investment and capacity-building to drive innovation and implementation. Communities and state partners often face staffing turnover and limited funding for intermediaries that convene partners to drive collective work. Deepening partnerships within and across organizations is critical to sustain efforts. In the Success Network, this has included regular convenings, targeted technical assistance, and direct connections to foster peer-to-peer learning. These convenings enable communities to share the current challenges they are grappling with, learn from other practitioners, and amplify their own insights to advance the collective work. Capacity and innovation requires investment, both in the form of targeted grants and sustained, adequate, and equitable funding for districts, postsecondary institutions, and state financial aid systems that allow leaders to make strategic long-term investments. Through targeted, flexible innovation grants, we seed local implementation efforts and build proof points for broader scaling of state policy across Illinois, catalyzing action that may not otherwise have been possible. Scaling similar strategies, through existing networks and emerging opportunities, will be essential to achieving a shared goal by 2040.

Conclusion

As organizers of the Success Network, we are eager to support this work moving forward. Please do not hesitate to reach out where there are opportunities for the Success Network and our members to help inform and achieve our state's emerging goals.



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