



# Education Policy Priority Brief

## Career and College Prep

### What Is Career and College Prep?

Career and college preparatory programs are designed to equip students with the skills, knowledge, and experiences necessary to thrive after high school graduation. These programs play a vital role in developing students who are ready to meet the demands of the modern world and prepare students for a variety of future paths—whether they choose to transition directly into the workforce or pursue postsecondary education. A diverse array of career and college preparatory programs is available, including but not limited to career and technical education (CTE), dual enrollment opportunities, vocational training, work-based learning experiences, advanced placement courses, and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs. These programs also often include [wraparound support services](#), such as mentoring, tutoring, and financial aid guidance, which help students overcome challenges like lack of access to quality education and information about higher education.

Expanding access to diverse career and college preparatory programs is essential to fostering a generation of capable, adaptable, and successful individuals who are ready to contribute to society and achieve their personal and professional goals. By participating in these programs, students are well-prepared to either enter the workforce with confidence or continue their education with the skills and knowledge needed for success.

#### Career and College Prep in the South

Career and college preparatory programs in the South face some disparities in access and quality, particularly for students from marginalized communities who often most benefit from having access to these programs provided by a public school system. While some states have made strides in expanding these opportunities, these opportunities are not uniformly available across the region. Many schools, especially those in rural and low-income areas, lack the resources, qualified educators, and infrastructure necessary to provide robust preparatory

programs. Additionally, systemic inequities, such as underfunding of public education and the impact of discriminatory policies, have exacerbated the gaps in access to college and career readiness.

## **How Can Expanding Career and College Prep Advance Equity in the South?**

High-quality career and college prep programs [support students](#) along a pathway to credential attainment, employment, upward economic mobility, and future success. Inequitable access to these opportunities stymies this objective and perpetuates social and economic disparities. Indeed, "[research](#) has shown that students have differential access to college preparatory curriculum and to high-quality career-technical programs that can lead to skilled employment in the modern economy. For example, schools with high proportions of students of color are much less likely to offer advanced courses the kinds of settings in which higher order skills are most purposefully developed and [these schools typically] offer academic courses or high-end career technical options and more remedial and vocational courses training for low-status occupations"

It is imperative that we enhance equitable access to high-quality career and college preparatory programs to equip our students with the skills and credentials necessary to lead successful lives after high school. These [programs](#) not only increase the earning potential of students from diverse backgrounds, but also help reduce economic disparities by breaking cycles of poverty. In the long term, these programs yield substantial economic benefits, not just for individuals, but for entire communities by promoting social mobility and addressing systemic barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

### **Legislative Efforts Related to Career and College Prep**

State legislative action plays a pivotal role in supporting equitable access to career and college preparatory programs. By prioritizing equitable access through targeted investments and comprehensive policy frameworks, state legislators can create an educational environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed and achieve upward economic mobility, thereby fostering more inclusive and diverse professional fields.

Several states saw legislation introduced and, in some instances, enacted, that models the way to increase access to and the quality of career and college prep programs this legislative session.

1. **Alabama:** [Senate Bill 253](#) (enacted): The Alabama Workforce Pathways Act will provide enhanced academic and skilled trade opportunities for Alabama students and facilitate different pathways for earning a high school diploma based on future career paths and requires that the State Board of Education and Department of Education develop a curriculum for earning a Workforce Pathways diploma.
2. **Florida:** [House Bill 917](#) (introduced): This bill sought to provide exemptions to allow minors (aged 16 or 17) to work in certain professions, require the examination of existing CTE offerings in the state, and provide funding and outcomes to better align CTE programs with the state's workforce needs.
3. **Georgia:** [House Bill 982](#) (introduced): This bill would have aligned K-12 education with in-demand careers, required the state to publish a "high-demand career list," and directed funding to programs that align with in-demand careers.
4. **Kentucky:** [Senate Bill 360](#) (introduced): The bill proposed directing the Kentucky Department of Education to establish a pilot monetary incentive program for AP students and AP teachers and require the development of an accelerated learning plan for students with identified strengths.