



Building a Stronger Future Workforce for Oklahoma

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Oklahoma's future workforce is in school today. Regarding education policy, the business community can work to ensure Oklahoma's K-12 and post-secondary education systems prepare students for the workforce and hold the state's educational institutions accountable to that goal. Several education policy recommendations will better align Oklahoma's K-12 and post-secondary education systems to the workforce needs of the economy and business community.

K-12 Education System Innovation through deregulation

A student in Oklahoma wishing to be a pilot for a living can begin to explore this career option as early as 9th grade at the [Oklahoma Aviation Academy at Norman Public Schools](#). This student take math and sciences in a contextual manner centered around how they would use these skills on the job. For Oklahoma, this is a revolutionary approach to education. The Oklahoma Aviation Academy partners with the University of Oklahoma and the Moore Norman Technology Center to offer its students a chance to travel down a career pathway in the aviation or aerospace industry. Oklahoma needs more of this.

Education is arguably the state government's most important responsibility. The state has the power and duty to create and manage an education system that prepares Oklahoma's children for future success. Over time, the Oklahoma Legislature has imposed over [650 statutory mandates](#) on public K-12 schools and districts. Though largely intended to improve education outcomes, this vast K-12 regulatory regime has resulted in what all overly cumbersome regulatory efforts produce: stifled innovation amongst those being regulated.

Instead of pursuing flexible, innovative methods of preparing students for the workforce, too often Oklahoma schools operate under a one-size-fits-all approach geared toward a college-readiness standard that is inapplicable to many students, and not well-aligned to the needs of the economy.

Educational pathways are opportunities for students to begin thinking about what they want to do after high school graduation. Pathways include college, career or military. Importantly for all pathways, however, is the ability for a student to change his or her mind and still be successful. Pathways allow K-12 education to be responsive to workforce needs.

- **College**— A student is pursuing a career that a college degree is needed. They may take more concurrent coursework, or AP classes than other pathways.
- **Career**— A student on a career pathway does not necessarily need or want to go to college, This student wants to earn a credential while in high school, or shortly thereafter, and begin working. They may take more career and technology courses.
- **Military**— A student on a military pathway wants to serve our country. This student may focus on JORTC and other courses needed to serve.

Over the past three decades, there have been several legislative attempts at opening opportunities for deregulation of schools and districts, including the Empower Schools and Districts Act, Education Deregulation Act, the creation of charter schools and conversion schools, and Enterprise schools. (Read more about these efforts [here](#).) While aimed in the right direction, these various

attempts at deregulation and flexibility to spark innovation have fallen short for a variety of reasons; the result is that these well-intended efforts sit largely unused by districts.

A different approach to education deregulation is needed--one that is squarely focused on preparing students for the workforce based on a student's chosen pathway. The Workforce Ready District (WRD) designation offers districts the opportunity to create programs, like the Aviation Academy, geared toward what the workforce needs, putting all Oklahoma students on a pathway to success.

A WRD begins by designating itself as a conversion district. This allows the district to function with the regulations of a charter school, which are more flexible than traditional regulations. Then a district may choose to take the next step and apply to be a WRD. The district must provide a plan for innovation identifying what areas of regulation the district will bypass in order to create pathway-oriented programs.

Unlike the other deregulation programs attempted in the past, the WRD framework includes incentives to be innovative. Once districts self-designate as a conversion school, districts will have access to funding to create an innovative plan and bonus funding if it meets the accountability metrics included in the plan. The district will have full control over what goes into the plan and what success of the program looks like.

Like the Aviation Academy, WRD will be able to partner with other educational institutions in the area. During the planning process, districts may include career and technology and higher education institutions; partnership between the education institutions will allow districts the ability to leverage assets to provide Oklahoma students with opportunities to choose a pathway.

