

Appendix 3: Report of Education Focus Groups and Interviews

Key Themes for Education and Training

The Alaska’s Workforce Future planning team heard from hundreds of training providers and educators through emails, virtual and in-person group discussions, one-on-one interviews, online surveys, and in-person meetings. Respondents overwhelmingly echoed three of the same broad themes that came out of the October 2023 Industry Convening sponsored by the Alaska Workforce Investment Board (AWIB) – the need for:

- increased and stable funding for K-16 education, including Career and Technical Education (CTE)
- more career information and guidance for students to help in making connections to further training, education, and jobs
- statewide coordination for workforce development and training.

Respondents’ perspectives on education, training, and workforce development in Alaska, including specific challenges, needs, and recommendations are detailed below.

Challenges for Education and Training

Funding

Alaska’s entire public secondary and postsecondary vocational/technical education system has significant challenges for creating new training programs or increasing training capacity for existing programs, especially to the scale needed to prepare thousands of new workers for the expected 20,000 new jobs Alaska will have over the next decade.

The K-16 public education system has had reduced state support for a decade due to budget constraints and shrinking student populations. Secondary and postsecondary programs report they have scant resources to maintain what they offer now, let alone to expand their programs. They need more qualified instructors, curriculum, and training space. They have the will but no wallet to prepare students and adults for the coming workforce boom.

One provider told us they are moving to a “3E” model – the only way they will offer any new or additional training is to use their existing programs and to “expand, extract, or enhance” them to create a new program or training opportunity.

Secondary CTE programs, especially the smaller ones, qualify for such a small federal Perkins allotment that they are opting out of Perkins. With no state support for CTE, these districts either cannot offer a CTE program, or they have to find a way to bring an instructor in or send their students to a location that offers some sort of technical training – either choice is costly and sometimes just not feasible.

Qualified instructors are hard to find, especially those who are eligible to teach CTE at the high school level. Someone who is an industry expert but does not have a teaching certificate must go through the state’s “Type M” certification process to be approved to teach a CTE course at a public high school. This Type M certification can only be used for that particular district.

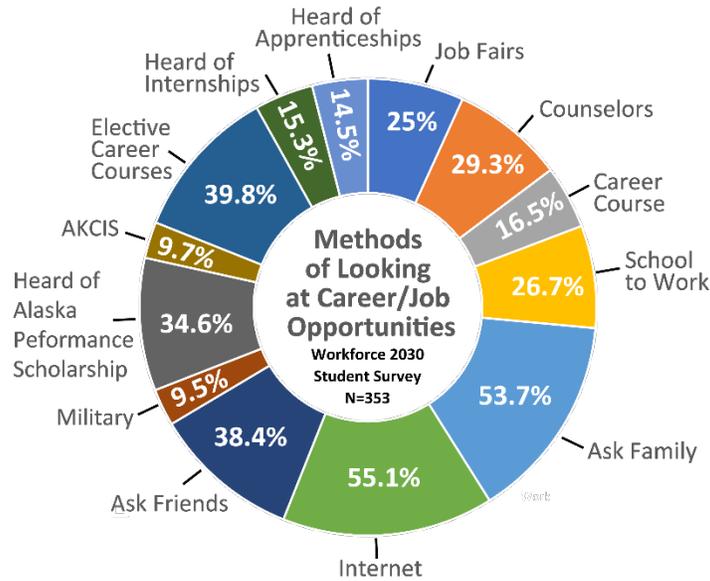
Schools, both secondary and postsecondary, reported a lack of available and affordable teacher housing as an impediment to recruiting and hiring teachers. This concern is most prevalent in rural areas but is also a problem in more urban areas. (The affordable housing shortage is not confined to the education sector – it is a challenge shared among employers across all industries.)

Career Guidance and Information

A recurring theme from a variety of stakeholders, including industry, individual employers, and economic and workforce development organizations, is the lack of career awareness of Alaska’s students and jobseekers.

Education respondents also highlighted this as a critical gap in our school system. School districts lack the resources to have a dedicated career counselor or advisor. If they have a school counselor, often the bulk of the school counselor’s time is spent on scheduling or on providing counseling for mental health and well-being, which is a huge need in many schools today. The idea of “career navigators, coaches, or guides” was mentioned repeatedly in our research. Some districts had career guides in the past, through a Department of Labor and Workforce Development grant program, but that funding has been gone for several years now.

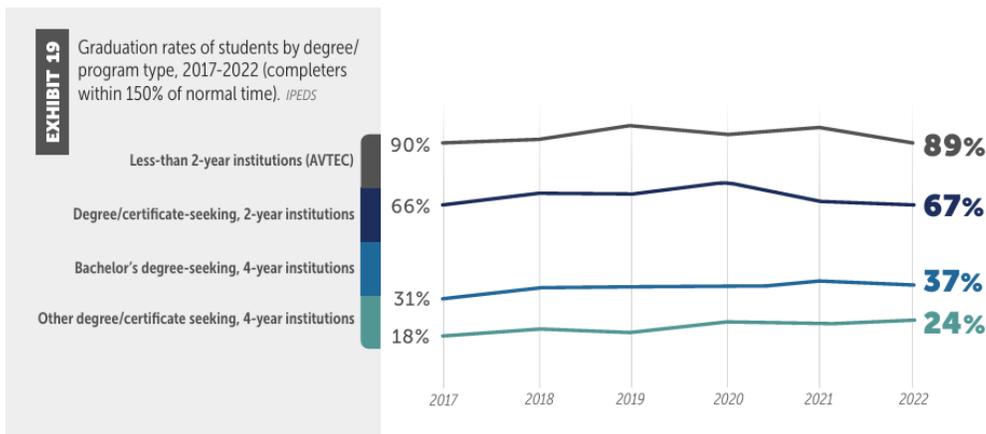
The state does have an online career information program that is available at no cost to all schools – and to all Alaska residents. The Alaska Career Information System, or AKCIS, is operated by the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education. It provides a wealth of information about careers and the training and education required for them, and includes interest and aptitude inventories, a comprehensive list of scholarships, and links to Alaska postsecondary training programs of all kinds. One robust tool in AKCIS is the Personal Learning and Career Plan (PLCP) feature. Users can map out their education and career pathway in detail, including high school courses, postsecondary training, licensing or certifications, and any other specific action steps that will be needed to chart their course for their chosen career pathway. Although AKCIS includes these and many more tools, most students are unlikely to be able to use the program to navigate the entire career planning process on their own. Student survey results, as shown in the chart below, reveal that only 10% of respondents used AKCIS to find career information, with most relying on information from family, friends, and school counselors. This supports the idea that *successful career guidance and planning is more apt to happen with an adult’s guidance and support – whether that is a parent, teacher, counselor, or some other trusted adult.*



Oregon’s Aspire¹ program is one model that aims to combine online career guidance/exploration with the support of an adult, by offering education, resources, and mentoring (1:1 and group) support to high school students to augment use of the Oregon CIS system. The program also provides activities focusing on career exploration, career and education research, admissions applications, scholarships, and financial aid forms.

Secondary and Postsecondary Completion

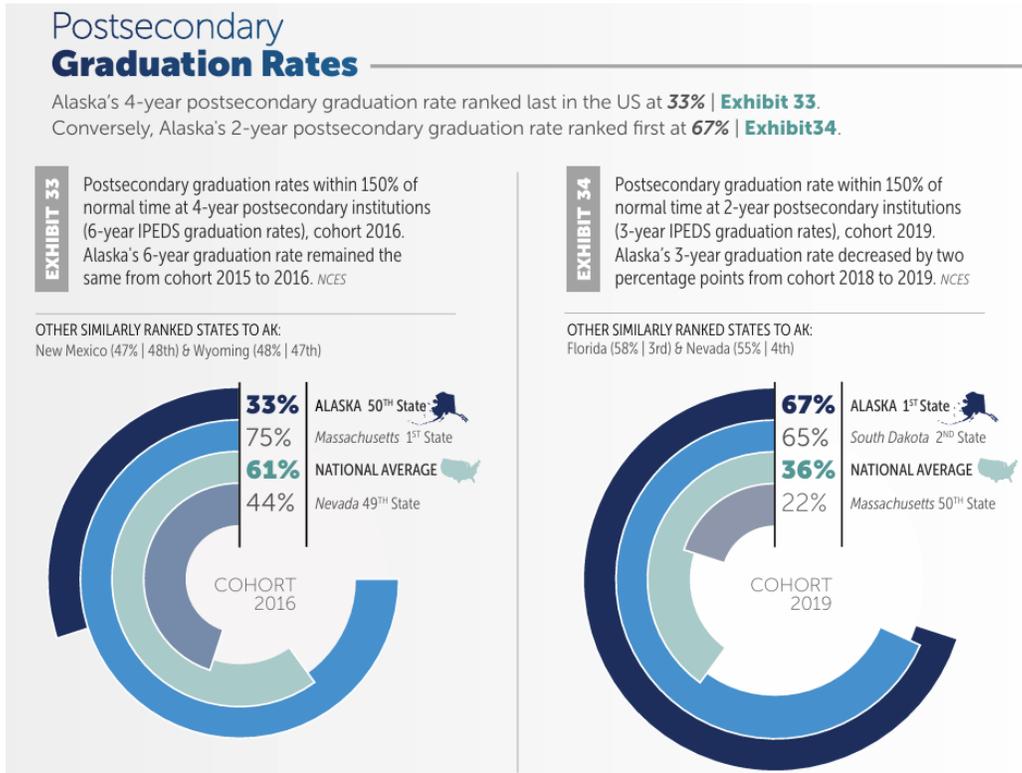
Another concern is Alaska’s low high school and postsecondary completion rates. According to the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) 2024 Alaska Higher Education Almanac,² Alaska’s high school graduation rate is 79%, compared to 87% nationally, putting the state in 46th place. Postsecondary completion, as shown below, illustrates the graduation rates for four different types of institutions and degree programs: less-than-2-year; 2-year; 4-year institutions/bachelor degrees; and 4-year institutions/other degrees or certificates.



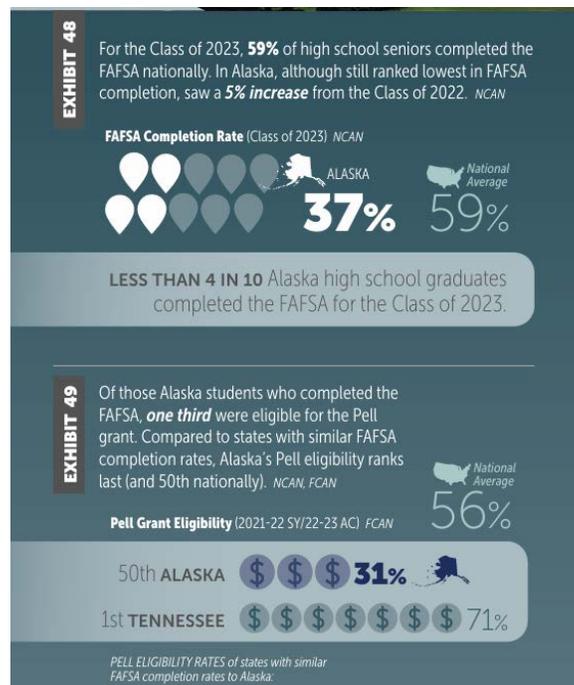
¹ Oregon Aspire - <https://oregonstudentaid.gov/aspire/>

² Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education – 2024 Alaska Higher Education Almanac - https://acpe.alaska.gov/Portals/0/OTHER/Pubs/2024_Almanac_E-Version.pdf

The next chart shows Alaska's postsecondary rates compared to the nation's, we are first in the nation in completion at 2-year institutions, but dead last in completion at 4-year institutions.



Another key finding from this report is the Alaska has one of the lowest rates of students completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which results in an estimated \$7.4 million left unclaimed in Pell Grants alone.



Coordination of Education and Workforce Development Efforts

Educators cited the lack of a coordinating entity to bring education and workforce development efforts together as another big challenge. They pointed to the coordination that previously resulted from the original 2010 CTE Plan and noted that it seems education and training providers and programs are working more in “silos” instead of coordinating their efforts. They may not even be aware of what other efforts are happening in their region or statewide, which hampers partnering and collaborative efforts.

Additional Challenges

- school leadership not understanding the value of CTE.
- youth with personal or social challenges, e.g., homelessness, involvement in justice system, foster system, other challenges; they may not know about or see opportunities specifically for themselves.
- need for innovation and new ways of thinking and doing things.
- sustainability is a challenge for any initiative, program, group, or workforce plan.
- need for a more streamlined system (fewer hoops to jump through) to quickly get funding to prospective students to qualify for state or federal money.
- need a system to connect students and employers for meaningful work-based learning experiences.
- need for more trained instructors to train the future workforce, and access to quality training in all regions of the state.
- a lack of educational programs that include computational thinking and computer science to increase work readiness for all students.
- need more focus on rural settings – how can we do things in rural areas; how can we combine or leverage our limited resources.
- need to enhance communication among job centers, school districts, and Alaska Native corporations to support Alaskans at every level and in every region.

What’s Working Now: Partnerships and Innovation to Expand Access and Opportunities

Secondary and postsecondary providers mentioned using a variety of partnerships to provide more opportunities for training. Some of them are listed below, and there are many other examples of successful partnerships in Alaska, which can provide models on which to build and expand.

- Bristol Bay Regional CTE Consortium (BBRCTE) – a partnership of four school districts – Bristol Bay, Lake and Peninsula, Southwest Region, and Dillingham – to introduce high school students to regional career opportunities. The program offers residential intensive coursework in several locations, which can lead to college credit and/ or industry recognized credentials. The districts have pooled resources, including their Perkins allotments, and have received funding from local economic development organizations, Alaska Native organizations, employers, the Alaska Health Education Consortium, and the US Department of Education. They also partner with a variety of training providers who help with instruction, curriculum, facilities, scholarships, and college credit. <https://bbrcte.org/>

- The Kuskokwim Corporation, a tribal corporation that includes ten Middle Kuskokwim River village corporations, is developing the Arviiq Regional Economic Development and Training Center in Aniak, with support from a federal grant. It will offer training to shareholders and other area residents at no cost, in addition to providing help with resume-writing, applying for scholarships, and connecting to jobs or training in other locations.³
- The Alaska Departments of Education and Early Development (DEED) and Labor & Workforce Development (DOLWD) are developing a new pilot career guide project to be implemented beginning in July 2024. Funded by DEED through a one-time state allocation, one career guide will be housed in each of three Job Centers--Ketchikan, Bethel, and Fairbanks--and will serve the surrounding areas and school districts. DEED is currently negotiating with the Root-Ed company to provide training and curriculum for the career guides to bring consistency to the services they provide. DEED has also created an online training course for career guides, to give them some foundational information as they begin their work. The DEED/DOLWD program also plans to partner with career guides who already work in the BBRCTE program (see above), to include them in the training and curriculum. The funding is only for one year, but the career guide positions will remain DOLWD employees, as Employment Services Technicians. The career guides will be providing or coordinating the following kinds of activities:
 - Workplace Habits - teach soft skills to prepare youth for employment
 - Résumé Writing, Job Search Assistance, Interviewing Skills, and Mock Interviews
 - Host Youth Job Fairs and work with partners to coordinate job fairs
 - Host Hot Job Workshops - connect with local employers and training providers to highlight "hot Jobs" for youth
 - Connect with training partners to host information sessions in schools: AVTEC, Alaska Works Partnership, Northern Industrial Training, AHEC, University schools, local regional training centers
 - Collaborate with Youth Shelters in local communities to work with youth that may need assistance with high school completion and/or employment
 - Engage with employers and educational institutions to help identify opportunities for job placements, internships, summer and seasonal employment, on-the-job training, and job shadowing
 - Assist with career exploration using assessment tools in AKCIS
 - Introduce students to career pathways and how to align their interests and skills with employment opportunities in the current labor market
 - Host FAFSA Nights to assist students with completing FAFSA applications
- The Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB) is facilitating a “Career Guidance Community of Practice” to gather individuals around the state who are working as career guides or career advisors. The Community includes nearly 100 individuals who participate in monthly calls to share resources and experiences. The DOLWD Career Guides will be joining this Community of Practice.
- ACPE is implementing the FAFSA Completion Initiative in partnership with the University of Alaska system. The initiative includes FAFSA training to know how to help students properly

³ <https://www.kyuk.org/economy/2022-03-04/new-job-training-center-opens-in-aniak-the-second-in-the-y-k-delta>

complete the forms; appointments with ACPE staff for assistance; resource materials and presentations; a dedicated website (<https://acpe.alaska.gov/FINANCIAL-AID/FAFSA>); and virtual and in-person FAFSA and college and career fairs across the state.

- The Fiber School Certified Technical Training (<https://thefiberschool.com/>) provides courses that cover fiber optic theory, hands-on skills testing assessments, and practical exams that test the student’s ability to comprehend and problem solve applications that will be encountered in fiber-optic work. The Fiber School offers a wide variety of courses applicable to broadband construction and broadband technology operations. They have provided training in Alaska for multiple telecom companies in urban and very remote rural settings, as well as for the IBEW, schools, and correctional facilities.
- Providence Hospital in Anchorage has launched a School Ambassador program in partnership with the Anchorage School District. Providence employees can apply to become “Ambassadors” to designated middle or high schools and spend up to 5 hours (during their regular working hours) per quarter at their assigned school with science or healthcare instructors who are interested in having their classes participate. The Ambassador may share opportunities for career exploration at Providence such as job shadowing; provide career information presentations as requested; and be available to answer student and instructor questions about health care pathways and careers. The program has proven very popular, and Providence has found that not only do the schools and students gain valuable first-hand health care career information through this program, but many of the Ambassadors said the experience has given them a renewed motivation for their own jobs and careers.
- The Alaska Maritime Education Consortium (AMEC) is a partnership between AVTEC and the University of Alaska to “collaborate to prepare Alaskans for afloat and ashore careers that will support and strengthen the maritime workforce by combining efforts to provide maritime training and education across the state.”⁴ They in turn are partnering with other providers and with industry to provide training, for example, they have developed a course with Yamaha for training Alaska instructors to develop and implement Yamaha Marine Maintenance Certification Program (MCP) Instructor training. The program also allows AMEC to obtain outboard motors and tools at cost.⁵
- “We Build Alaska” is a model for a collaborative model of bringing awareness to students and job seekers about career pathways, in this case specific to the construction industry. They provide advocacy, education, resources, and information to the next generation of construction workers.⁶
- Academies of Anchorage,⁷ a program launching in fall 2024 to provide career pathways for all Anchorage high school students; includes industry and postsecondary partnerships, internship opportunities, dual credit programs; emphasizes connection to community and industry and career and life readiness, not just the college aspect.

⁴ [Alaska Maritime Education Consortium - Alaska Safety Alliance](#)

⁵ UAA Green and Gold, September 5, 2023 - <https://pwsc.alaska.edu/pwsc-news/alaska-maritime-education-consortium.cshtml>

⁶ We Build Alaska - <https://webuildalaska.com/>

⁷ Anchorage School District - <https://www.asdk12.org/Academies>

- Yukon Koyukuk School District (YKSD) pilot career exploration program – a career counselor travels to each site once a year to work directly with students, and a group of juniors and seniors travel to a central location for further preparation, followed by a capstone event the first week in May for seniors who need more intense one-on-one support.
- YKSD also has short-term intensive trainings with industry experts traveling to outlying schools to introduce students to a variety of career areas.
- Collaborative Grants from DEED, which focused on building relationships with industry (this grant funding has since run out).
- Kodiak (through the DEED Collaborative grants) establish a program where teachers and students learn together and earn a credential together; also, a program for partnerships with industry for employers to come into CTE programs and make the links between what students are learning and how that prepares them for specific jobs.
- Alaska Council of School Administrators has a program to train teachers in how to teach computer science.
- IBEW is working on changing the driver’s license requirement as a prerequisite to apply for an apprenticeship, which is a big barrier for a lot of rural folks; and IBEW is trying to recognize other barriers for anyone interested in training and apprenticeships.

Priority Education Recommendations for Alaska’s Workforce Future

The top recommendations for the Alaska’s Workforce Future Plan mirror many of those from other stakeholder groups:

- increase state support for education and training at all levels, including specifically for CTE, and make the funding sustainable.
- designate or create a third-party organization (not a state agency or entity) to function as the overall convener/coordinator to foster collaboration among entities and programs, make stronger connections between education and industry, advocate for policy changes to support collaborative efforts, and continue implementation of the Alaska’s Workforce Future Plan.
- build on strategies, recommendations, and the collaborative model from the 2010 Alaska CTE Plan.
- establish career guides in each school district in a sustainable program, building on models such as Oregon’s Aspire program and the new Alaska DOLWD/DEED Career Guide program.
- establish programs to connect students to work experiences, particularly in rural areas – e.g., pay stipends to students for internships or pre-apprenticeships, and create and maintain a statewide database of internship opportunities to connect students and jobseekers with participating employers.
- develop sustainable staff development programs for CTE instructors/faculty.
- make collaboration a criterion for all education and workforce grants, i.e., incentivize collaboration and partnerships.