

Braiding Funding for Effective Career Pathways:

How states can combine multiple funding sources to strengthen career pathways initiatives

By Spencer Sherman, Education First, and Quentin Suffren, Insightful Education Solutions. April 2026.

States policymakers can create more effective and coherent career pathways initiatives by braiding multiple funding sources to advance their goals. This brief explains how. [Read the full brief here.](#)

Background

Braiding is the process of combining multiple funding sources for a single program or purpose. It is an essential tool for state policymakers hoping to build career pathways programs in their state.

In this brief, “career pathways” refers to an integrated program offered in high schools and immediately after high school that includes career and technical education, dual-enrollment coursework, advising, work-based learning and opportunities to graduate with a credential of value.

High-quality career pathways programs are powerful tools to increase students’ economic mobility, but they are often expensive and complicated for states to build.

Braiding is critical to building career pathways because it:

- **breaks down funding silos**, reducing the risk students fall into the cracks in the transitions between K12 education, postsecondary education and workforce; and
- **leads to a more efficient and effective use of limited funds** for the high cost of career pathways programs.

Principles of Effective Braiding

Understanding how to braid funding effectively requires more than a working knowledge of grant rules and allowable uses. Instead, it requires a common set of operating principles:

1. **Work backwards from goals, not forwards from funding:** Begin with a clear articulation of the desired outcomes for specific beneficiaries before identifying possible funding sources.
2. **Start with fixed, fill in flexible:** Start the braiding process by fitting together the most restricted funding sources, then use progressively more flexible sources to fill the remaining gaps.
3. **Braid funding horizontally and vertically:** Braiding is most effective when it operates both “vertically” (across federal, state and local) and “horizontally” (across K12, postsecondary and workforce).
4. **Braiding is a people problem, not a math problem:** Relationships and governance structures across agencies matter more than accounting sophistication. Successful initiatives include cross-sector teams at both the governors’ cabinet level (for removing obstacles) and agency level (for implementation).

Recommended Action Steps for State Policymakers

Step 1: Set Clear Policy Goals

Braiding efforts are most successful when they are part of a larger pathways initiative. These can be launched by **executive order** (e.g., [Delaware](#)), by **legislation** (e.g., [Texas](#)) or by **cross-agency plans** (e.g., [Rhode Island](#))

Step 2: Inventory Funding

Build an inventory of current federal and state funding sources, map them to the activities they currently support and identify any unfilled gaps. Common pathways-related funding sources and uses include:

	K12	Postsecondary	Workforce
Fixed <i>(least flexible)</i>	ESSA Title II: teacher training	Traditional Pell: tuition for low-income students *Promise programs: tuition for low-income students	Registered apprenticeship grants: apprenticeships meeting federal standards
Intermediate Flexibility	ESSA Title I: supporting low-income students Perkins Local Grants: local CTE costs **Federal Scholarship Tax Credit: transportation, fees, equipment	TRIO / GEAR UP: college advising and access **Workforce Pell: short-term postsecondary training	WIOA Youth: Work-based learning (WBL), credentials *State workforce funds: WBL, credentials
Flexible	Perkins Reserve (15%): various CTE-related costs		WIOA Set-Aside (10%): various workforce-related costs

*State funding source; **New funding source

Step 3. Choose an Entry Point

With a vision in place and a funding inventory completed, state leaders must decide whether to braid funding to **augment an existing program or create a new program**. Augmenting is generally more efficient, unless no current program is targeted to the desired outcome or beneficiaries.

State leaders must then decide on a strategy to operationalize the braiding approach. There are two primary mechanisms:

- **Front-end mechanisms** simplify the experience for the people who ultimately must navigate multiple funding streams to run their programs (e.g., Louisiana's [SuperApp](#)).
- **Back-end mechanisms** merge the reporting and accountability requirements that grantees face across multiple programs, such as through a unified portal, passive reporting or common metrics.

To learn more, read [the full brief](#) and find other policy briefs in this series: [Pathways Policies that Work: Practical Advice for Policymakers](#).