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No Dead Ends

A Policy Road Map for Ensuring Boundless Opportunities
at School, at Work, and in Life

AT A GLANCE

No Dead Ends offers a common-sense, field-tested policy road map for re-engineering our education and workforce systems so everyone has boundless opportunities to advance through school, work, and life.

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No Dead Ends Policy Road Map

In this policy road map, JFF offers common-sense, field-tested policy solutions that state and federal lawmakers can enact today to begin reengineering education and workforce systems toward the vision and core principles of No Dead Ends. We organize these policy recommendations under four key priority areas.



PRIORITY 1

Empower people with data, guidance, and resources that enable them to navigate their work and learning journeys and flourish throughout their lives.



PRIORITY 2

Recognize everyone's skills, knowledge, and expertise, regardless of when and where their learning and development experiences occur.



PRIORITY 3

Blur the lines between learning and work systems to foster common purpose among educators and employers and to smooth pathways to economic advancement.



PRIORITY 4

Help people get ahead during times of economic uncertainty and personal adversity.

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Call to Action

Our nation's education and employment systems were built based on the assumption of a linear sequence of life events: People first graduate high school, maybe go to college, enter the world of work, raise a family, reach the pinnacle in a career, and then retire. Such a rigid and siloed approach to learning and work may have once enabled some people to make ends meet. Yet in today's dynamic economy—marked by the rapid rising and falling demand for certain skills and jobs—people can ill afford to take such a linear journey from school to work. Instead, as futurist [Heather E. McGowan](#) depicts in her research on shifting life blocks, the new economy demands that people continuously cycle through learning and working over their lives.¹



Right now in the United States, accessing education and skills development is still too expensive, too time consuming and cumbersome to navigate, and too disconnected from and unresponsive to labor market demands and the realities of personal lives. Meanwhile, our approach to work often serves as an impediment to learning, development, and economic advancement and instead produces working conditions for too many workers that undercut their financial well-being, self-determination, and basic safety and security.

This results in an approach to learning and work that places limits on the aspirations of millions of people in the United States. Our education and workforce systems set artificial endpoints on career pathways by producing credentials with little value in the labor market or portability along a pathway. Our systems also place ceilings on career advancement by not recognizing people's skills, competencies, and potential when their experiences do not fit neatly into the mold of a bachelor's degree holder. Additionally, our approach to learning and work lays all the burdens, risks, and opportunity costs on people. It forces impossible choices between focusing on one's career and taking care of family responsibilities. It also exacts harmful risks when people must change directions in their lifelong learning and work journeys, such as pursuing a new skill or entering a new career field.



**People deserve a different approach—
one that produces no dead ends at
school, at work, and in life.**

No Dead Ends is a call to action for reengineering the nation's education and workforce systems to properly reflect the nonlinear lifelong journeys people take through learning and work. No Dead Ends responds to the pressing needs of:



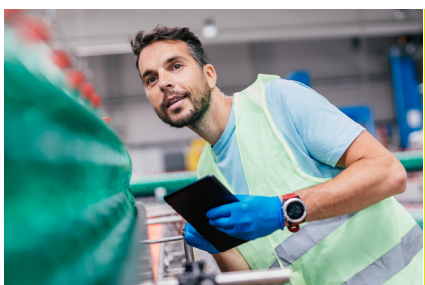
The **two-thirds of Gen Z students** who worry about college debt and pursuing the wrong postsecondary path.²



The **more than half of adults** who believe they need to gain new skills to prepare for the impacts of artificial intelligence and other seismic changes to the economy.³



The **100,000 people in this country** who stay home from work each month because they lack access to child care or other supports that would enable them to meet their caregiving responsibilities.⁴



The almost **one-third of adults** with a criminal record who face a complex web of rules and regulations excluding them from pursuing jobs they're qualified for or can learn to do.⁵



The **disproportionally large share of Black workers** employed in low-wage jobs. Black workers comprise **12.8% of the U.S. labor force**, and yet they represent 30% or more of the nation's home health care aides, bus drivers, and security guards and just 7% of lawyers.⁶



At Jobs for the Future (JFF), we believe this learn-and-work system must provide boundless opportunities for economic advancement.

To achieve this vision of No Dead Ends, lawmakers must make the system:

- **Accessible**—all options for learning and work remain available through permeable entry points, regardless of where people are along their learning and work journeys
- **Discoverable**—everyone can explore their learning and work options and make decisions that best match their goals and needs
- **Achievable**—all options for learning and work are attainable, no matter the circumstances and challenges people encounter

Building on our 40-plus years of experience partnering with policymakers, employers, education and training systems, and community leaders, JFF understands what it takes to transform our learning and work systems. The federal and state policy recommendations contained in the No Dead Ends policy road map are borne out of evidence of what works on the ground and would push the envelope to bolder innovation.

At JFF, we firmly believe that if policymakers take on this policy challenge and eliminate dead ends, the country will make progress toward the ambitious goal we have embraced as our [North Star](#): By 2033, 75 million people facing systemic barriers to advancement will work in quality jobs.⁷



PRIORITY 1

Empower people with data, guidance, and resources that enable them to navigate their work and learning journeys and flourish throughout their lives.

The Problem

With a myriad of education, training, and career options available, learners and workers often lack the objective information and personalized guidance they need to succeed. And due to the fragmented and uneven manner that education and skills development are funded in the United States, learners and workers face significant gaps in financial resources to pursue high-quality skills development opportunities throughout their learning and working journeys.

The Solution

What policymakers can do to bring clarity to the chaotic work and learning ecosystem:

- ✓ **Set statewide goals for doubling the number of learners and workers in quality jobs.** Nearly 40% of [workers surveyed](#) recently said that they were in [low- or medium-quality jobs](#).⁸ While individual employers may be able to improve some working conditions one workplace at a time, strong public policies are necessary to make lasting change, either by offering employers incentives to improve job quality or requiring them to take steps that create new quality jobs.

The federal government and states can achieve this by setting a clear, numerical goal for expanding access to quality jobs. In this plan, policymakers should set standards for what represents a quality job; at JFF, [we recommend](#) considering compensation, agency and culture, structure, and advancement opportunities.⁹ Policymakers should measure progress toward their goal and establish key incentives and enforcement mechanisms for strengthening working conditions and addressing disparities in access to quality jobs. Policymakers can also use their bully pulpit to bring public attention to local employers that commit to and make progress toward achieving this standard.

✓ **Strengthen the efficacy of publicly funded programs** in education, training, and work-based learning. The [proliferation of education and training](#) programs and credentials makes it increasingly difficult for workers and learners to understand which options provide a good return on their investment.¹⁰ Policymakers can provide greater transparency and improved accountability in the marketplace of programs and credentials by focusing on a [consistent set of quality standards](#), financial incentives, and public-facing dashboards that report on learning and work outcomes.¹¹ Policymakers can make strides by investing in data infrastructure for tracking learning and work results and by funding institutions based on their ability to improve outcomes and close gaps. This should entail defining a trusted mechanism and fuller range of quantifiable indicators for measuring the quality and performance of programs across learn and work systems.

✓ **Establish a comprehensive career navigation system** at federal and state levels to provide timely and accurate information about in-demand jobs and skills and offer personalized guidance and support to learners and workers along their journeys. Such assistance should include how to assess and represent job skills and experiences; develop decision-making, critical thinking, and goal-setting skills; build professional networks; and identify good jobs and employers. Yet access to high-quality career navigation services and supports [remains low](#) and inequitable

because, in large part, public institutions and community organizations are not given proper resources or expected to offer such support.¹² Policymakers can make progress by [investing in career coaches as well as in online tools and resources](#) for supporting career navigation.¹³ And policymakers should also invest in systems and intermediary organizations that provide strong points of connection with education institutions, community-based organizations, human services agencies, workforce agencies, and employers to meet the needs of learners, workers, and jobseekers alike.



✓ **Provide flexible, portable funding for skills acquisition and lifelong learning.** Short-term credentials are an important currency in today's labor market. While [30 million quality jobs](#) do not require a bachelor's degree, many do require short-term education or training beyond high school, such as a certificate or other occupational credential.¹⁴ However, right now, [major funding gaps](#) prevent workers and learners from accessing rapid skilling opportunities.¹⁵ In a February CommonSense American [poll](#) from the National Institute for Civil Discourse, 87% of the respondents expressed strong support for expanding Pell Grant eligibility to cover workforce training programs.¹⁶ This finding suggests that there's demand for the government to step up financial support for short-term training programs, and that policymakers can respond by removing barriers to postsecondary financial aid programs and increasing investments in training accounts deployed through the public workforce development system. This should include congressional action on [short-term Pell](#) and training accounts available through the public workforce system.¹⁷ In doing so, policymakers should focus on learner and worker populations who do not qualify for or cannot access other financial assistance.





PRIORITY 2

Recognize everyone’s skills, knowledge, and expertise, regardless of when and where their learning and development experiences occur.

The Problem

The Degree-based hiring and teaching and learning practices centering the [Carnegie Unit](#) have long been the status quo in the United States, but there are disadvantages to that approach, such as creating bias and [limiting access to jobs](#).¹⁸ It can also spark [degree inflation](#).¹⁹ In response, employers, education systems, and policymakers have begun to embrace a *skills-first* mantra for capturing and recognizing a broader set of knowledge and abilities—regardless of where and when these learning and development experiences occur.²⁰

Innovative skills-based approaches, such as credit for prior learning, direct assessment competency-based education, skills-based hiring, and learning and employment records, have yet to reach scale.

The Solution

What policymakers can do to recognize skills in education, workforce, and employment systems:

- ✓ **Make awarding credit for prior learning and work experiences a common and consistent practice in education and workforce systems.** [Credit for Prior Learning](#) (CPL) refers to various methods that postsecondary institutions use to evaluate students’ experiential learning for college credit.²¹ Common methods for assessing prior learning include exams, portfolios, and evaluations of noncollege and noncredit programs. Despite CPL’s promise of making postsecondary education and training more accessible and affordable, especially for adult learners, [few colleges use it](#).²² We must overcome these obstacles to ensure all learners have access to all educational and career advancement opportunities.

Policymakers can take major steps forward in expanding the practice of awarding credit for prior learning. This can include investing in tools and technical assistance that build a shared language around competencies and create a common assessment repository to improve skills transparency and portability. Policymakers can also offer incentives for wider adoption by permitting the use of financial aid to pay for such assessments and by providing incentives to institutions for awarding credit for prior learning. In addition to taking these steps, policymakers should [eliminate red tape](#) in accreditation and financial aid processes to pave the way for [direct assessment competency-based education](#) approaches.²³

- ✓ **Build conditions for skills-based hiring by bolstering the adoption of digital learning and employment records (LERs) as an alternative to traditional resumes.** A LER is a [comprehensive digital record](#) of a worker's skills and competencies.²⁴ LERs have several advantages over resumes, especially for people who developed their skills through a wide range of experiences—whether in the classroom, on the job, or in the military, for example. LERs use a standardized data language, which makes it possible for previously disconnected educational systems and employers to access and share information about an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities. The issuing party automatically verifies the information and digitally encrypts it, meaning employers can trust its accuracy.

And LERs are dynamic, making them easy to keep up-to-date. Despite the technology's potential, LER systems' deployment has been hindered by the lack of a supportive interoperable IT infrastructure.

Policymakers can support the expansion of LERs by convening stakeholders and supporting pilot programs to encourage and offer incentives for adoption. They should also establish standards and data infrastructure to ensure integrity, protection, privacy, portability, and interoperability of LER systems.





PRIORITY 3

Blur the lines between learning and work systems to foster common purpose among educators and employers and to smooth pathways to economic advancement.

The Problem

As a nation, we have tried for decades to break down silos and build bridges between classroom instruction and the world of work. But despite making some progress in smoothing career pathways through the expansion of career and technical education, work-based learning experiences, and college-in-high-school programs, learners still face major obstacles at key transition points along their learning and work journeys. Common obstacles include the [summer melt](#) between high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment and the [underemployment of vast numbers of college graduates](#) who express their education experiences did not prepare them for the world of work.²⁵ Meanwhile, the education, workforce, and employment systems they encounter remain largely divided and inefficient at developing talent.

In the [Big Blur](#), JFF laid out a vision for a new integrated learning and work system for young adults ages 16 to 20 that would result in the attainment of postsecondary credentials and skills with labor market value.²⁶ Industry partners would get involved by articulating the skills and characteristics they look for in new employees and engaging learners in meaningful work-based learning experiences. Such a career-connected, de-siloed approach to learning and work would also serve adult learners well in their education and employment needs.

This Big Blur vision is taking hold in some places, like the Sturm Collaborative Campus in Colorado. Yet local innovations largely occur despite entrenched and siloed systems, governance structures, incentives, and policies—making scale impossible.

The Solution

What policymakers can do to begin erasing the disconnects between learning and work:

- ✓ **Ensure that all college-in-high-school course offerings align with college and career pathways.** Over the past decade, high school students' opportunities to take college-level courses for college credit has [increased significantly](#) and become a key feature of the high school experience.²⁷ However, [inequities](#) continue to persist across these programs.²⁸ The question now is how to close equity gaps and make these dual credit or dual enrollment experiences more intentionally connected to desired college majors and career fields of interest.

Federal and state policymakers can provide more resources to support student access and success in dual enrollment. They also can set expectations for institutions to design and offer dual enrollment course sequences that meld rigorous academics in core, widely transferrable education subjects along with career and technical courses providing early exposure and preparation for in-demand, high-wage career fields. Advising students to make smart choices is equally critical, especially for first-generation college students. Policymakers can direct public resources to eliminate tuition and fees specifically for intentional college and career pathway dual enrollment courses and boost funding for education and career advising.

- ✓ **Mobilize employers to expand access to meaningful, paid work-based learning experiences.** Work-based learning models that marry theoretical learning with on-the-job training provide individuals with applicable, transferrable skills, paid work experiences, and social and professional capital to enter and advance in high-demand, high-wage occupations. Despite this promise and growing popularity, enrollment in quality work-based learning and programs like Registered Apprenticeships [remains very small and out of reach](#) for many learners and jobseekers.²⁹

A key barrier is that in traditional learning and work systems, neither educators nor employers consider work-based learning a core function of what they do. [Work is a reality for many learners](#) but due to our structures and systems, a job is often considered an impediment to educational achievement.³⁰ Meanwhile, many jobs are not structured to facilitate learning and development.



Policy action can begin to address these impediments. For starters, policy should ease the burdens on employers for engaging in work-based learning experiences. Policymakers can invest in regional sector strategies and intermediary organizations, which have proven to [provide the organizing structures](#) needed to engage employers in identifying common skill needs.³¹ They have also improved the quality of and access to work-based learning experiences and recruitment and retention of new sources of talent to fill critical workforce needs. Additionally, policy can provide financial and accountability incentives for employers, schools, and workforce agencies to provide work-based learning experiences and for individuals to afford to engage in these programs. In taking these actions, policymakers should seek to improve the consistency of work-based learning experiences by setting [quality standards](#) for common work-based learning models, including [for pre-apprenticeships](#) and youth apprenticeships, and targeting investments in communities and populations systemically underserved by public and private institutions.³²





PRIORITY 4

Help people get ahead during times of economic uncertainty and personal adversity.

The Problem

As tuition costs and student loan burdens have grown and many schools fail to produce positive economic returns on students' investments, people face tough choices and significant opportunity costs when deciding whether to pursue a new skill or career field. Likewise, individuals receiving public benefits, like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and child care assistance, too often face an impossible decision: pursue a better job with higher pay and risk losing your public benefits or stay in a low-quality, low-wage job to keep the benefits. The former may leave you worse off financially than the latter. And yet, deciding to forgo an education and training or a decent job offer is a surefire path to economic stagnation and dead ends. Meanwhile, for the millions of people with criminal records, their options and opportunities are already restricted in [countless ways](#) that have no or limited bearing on public safety concerns.³³

The Solution

What policymakers can do to decrease the risk of pursuing learning and work while removing structural barriers to opportunity:

- ✓ **Use outcomes-based financing solutions to promote a better and more learner-friendly market for education and training.** [Outcomes-based financing approaches](#) offer significant promise to improve accountability, access, affordability, and equity in the postsecondary education and training system.³⁴ That is because income share agreements, outcomes-based loans, and other forms of income-contingent financing tie the amount learners pay for education and training to the amount of money they earn after they complete their programs. Unfortunately, the regulatory treatment of these models stifles income-contingent financing providers from clearly knowing what laws and regulations apply to them and how to comply, and it may leave students at risk of being abused by the system. Legislation that establishes clear and strong regulatory guardrails can fix this.

✓ **Make family assistance programs work for learners and workers—especially for people on the front lines of caregiving.**

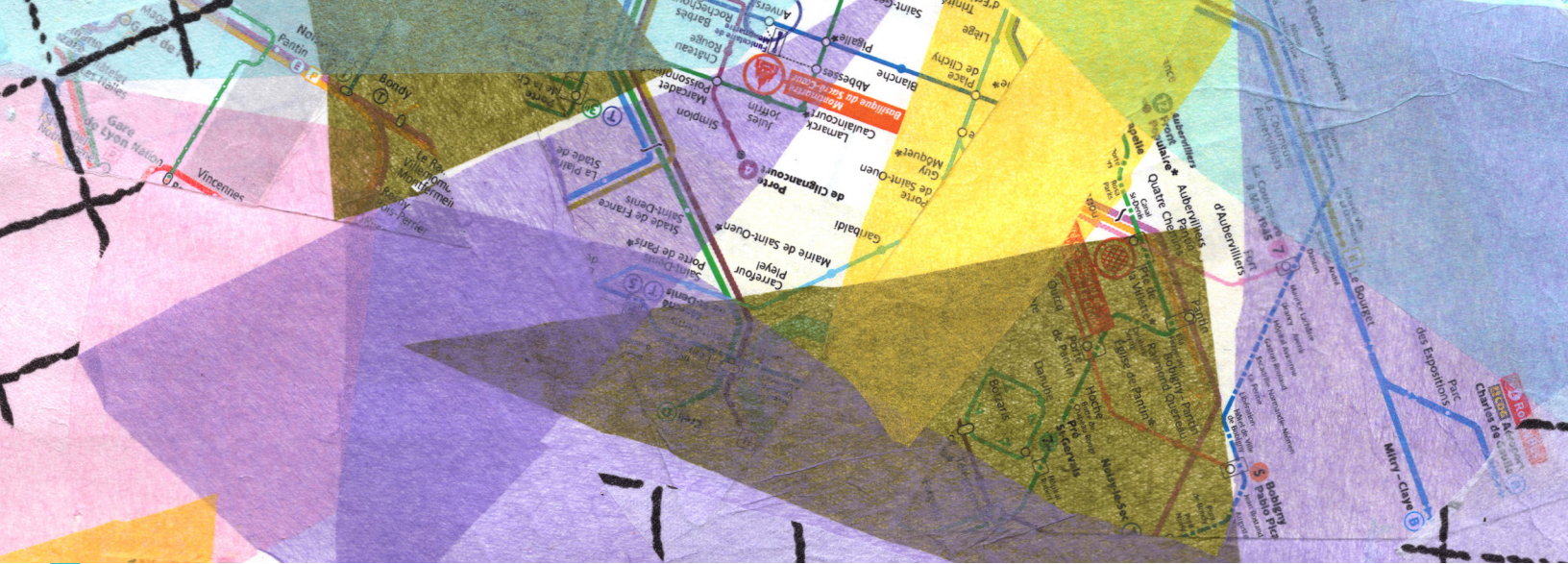
Our systems should make it easy for people in need to access public benefits to pay for child care, elder care, food, transportation, and housing. Policymakers can [support families](#) and destigmatize the receipt of public benefits by establishing a “no wrong door” approach to accessing publicly funded employment, training, and human service supports.³⁵ This can be accomplished through forming a single, [streamlined workforce development system](#).³⁶ It should have common intake processes, standards for determining eligibility, and performance metrics—as well as deploy benefits navigators in community settings like colleges, workplaces, and community organizations—to screen learners and workers for public benefits eligibility. Moreover, policymakers should determine ways to eliminate the “[benefits cliffs](#),” where people who receive public benefits risk abruptly losing those benefits when their earnings increase.³⁷ And critically, policymakers should consider tax credits or other assistance that would increase the take-home pay of workers in care economy jobs.

✓ **Enable fair chances at economic advancement for people with records**

by increasing access to postsecondary education and training aligned to quality jobs. The [reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility](#) for people during incarceration presents an opportune time to expand and

improve postsecondary education and training program offerings in correctional facilities.³⁸ It can also mitigate other barriers individuals continue to face while incarcerated and after their release. Key policy steps for [normalizing opportunities](#) include ensuring students can access high-quality learning experiences in person or online and incorporating paid internships or other work-based learning opportunities in preparation for continuing education and employment in quality jobs post-release.³⁹

Policymakers can do this by investing in technology and academic and career services tailored to these students, overturning restrictive correctional policies, and incorporating education and training participation as a core activity during parole or probation. In addition, policymakers can also encourage and support more people to enroll in education and training by awarding certain benefits and privileges during enrollment. Policymakers can prohibit colleges and universities from considering conviction histories in college admissions policies and program eligibility requirements and offerings. They should also adjust financial aid requirements for satisfactory academic progress to account for the many learners needing to pause along their learning journeys or facing academic disruptions beyond their control.



Conclusion

All people in the United States deserve education and workforce systems and policies that recognize and support lifelong journeys through learning and work. No Dead Ends provides a policy road map for improving access to high-quality learning and work experiences.

JFF is forming partnerships with policymakers and field partners to advance our No Dead Ends policy priorities. For more information, please visit jff.org, contact us, or email the [Policy & Advocacy](mailto:policy@jff.org) team directly at policy@jff.org.

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