



STAND UP FOR
NO DEAD ENDS



No Dead Ends

A Policy Agenda for Flexible Paths and Limitless Futures



Today's evolving labor-market conditions and new technologies demand a modernized approach to education and workforce development — one that's fit for the realities of a lifelong and nonlinear journey through learning and work.

Imagine if we could create a system that has:

- **No limits** on the aspirations of learners and workers
- **No wrong doors** and gatekeepers in pursuit of opportunity
- **No artificial endpoints** on education and training pathways
- **No ceilings** on career advancement
- **No impossible trade-offs** when changing needs arise



At Jobs for the Future (JFF), we believe this vision is within reach if we, as a nation, pursue bold policy and systems change based on the principle of **No Dead Ends in school, at work, and in life**. A system without dead ends means that no one, no matter their starting point, detours, or life stage, faces undue barriers to quality learning experiences and quality jobs.

Enclosed is a policy road map for building momentum toward No Dead Ends. To learn more, email the JFF [Policy & Advocacy](#) team at policy@jff.org.





Empowering People to Navigate Their Learning and Work Journeys

How policymakers can help people make informed choices

- **Uphold quality, accountability, and transparency for credentials and skills development programs:**
 - » Establish a consistent set of quality standards across systems, including placement into quality in-demand jobs and improved earnings, as well as portability, stackability, and transferability of credits and credentials to ensure meaningful long-term economic advancement.
 - » Invest in data infrastructure to track outcomes longitudinally across education and workforce systems and publicly report actionable information in user-friendly dashboards.
 - » Identify, fund, and scale affordable education and training programs that lead to quality credentials aligned with labor-market demand.
- **Enhance coaching and navigational supports to inform education and career decision-making, emphasizing multiple pathways and entry points and focused on cross-system collaboration and innovation:**
 - » Adopt a cross-agency strategy and quality standards for career coaching and advising.
 - » Invest in and expand access to career coaches to provide personalized guidance to workers and learners, regardless of setting, and invest in professional development to effectively implement best practices.
 - » Upgrade career tools with AI capabilities and real-time labor-market insights to augment career coaching.
- **Enable public systems to respond to labor-market shifts driven by AI and other economic changes, so workers and learners can access the information and skills needed to compete for the jobs of the future:**
 - » Boost regional capacity to identify jobs that will change or be created by AI and to design and deliver education and workforce programming that develops an AI-ready workforce, especially within communities currently lacking access to robust program options.
 - » Enhance transitional assistance for dislocated workers as well as for those at high risk of displacement, including career coaching, job placement support, and access to training that emphasizes digital and AI fluency.

Action on the No Dead Ends policy priorities will drive economic success for America's people, businesses, and communities.



Elevating Skills as the Currency for Advancement

What policymakers can do to help people gain recognition for skills acquired through formal and informal learning

- **Encourage wider adoption of evidence-driven, skills-based approaches to postsecondary education and training, including prior learning assessments and competency-based education, to accelerate credential attainment and advancement in quality jobs:**
 - » Build a shared language around competencies and create a common assessment repository to improve skills transparency and portability; deploy tools and technical assistance to support implementation.
 - » Adjust funding mechanisms to incentivize skills-based learning approaches and boost student and institutional participation.
- **Build the conditions for skills-based hiring and match people with quality jobs more efficiently and fairly through a modern platform:**
 - » Strengthen commitment to skills-based hiring by evaluating workers based on demonstrated skills, competencies, and abilities; remove unnecessary degree requirements from government jobs, including for contractors, as a model for private-sector action.
 - » Invest in the infrastructure and develop the shared governance for an AI-enabled, interoperable labor exchange, consisting of a credential registry, learning and employment records (LERs), and skill-based job description generators; promote wider adoption with clear guardrails that ensure LER integrity and portability, and personal privacy.



Erasing the Boundaries Between Learning and Work

What policymakers can do to connect learning to quality jobs

- **Provide career-connected learning pathways into quality jobs:**
 - » Expand access to Registered Apprenticeship through system reforms and new investments designed to encourage employer engagement, reward performance, sustain partnerships, and promote pathways such as youth and pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeship degrees.
 - » Incentivize the growth and access to education-to-career pathway models that accelerate the attainment of postsecondary credentials of value, enhance AI fluency, and boost entry into quality jobs, through high-quality work-based learning experiences and rigorous college-level academics delivered through dual enrollment.
- **Encourage employers to support upskilling, education attainment, and AI readiness of workers:**
 - » Expand tax credits or grant programs that incentivize employers to sponsor training for workers earning low- to mid-range wages. To qualify for public funding, the training should lead to a recognized credential, such as a certificate, apprenticeship, or degree, to ensure workers can access experiences with value across multiple employers.
 - » Invest in industry or sector partnerships in which the workforce system convenes employers to align on critical workforce needs, co-develop education and training curricula, and provide mentorship and hire people who complete the programs.



Enabling Economic Mobility

What policymakers can do to help people overcome barriers to opportunity

- **Provide people with the resources they need to meet their educational and career goals, emphasizing quality guardrails and the portability and stackability of credentials to ensure a durable return on investment:**
 - » Provide learners and workers with adequate financial resources and supports to enter into and complete high-quality postsecondary pathways.
 - » Increase funding for training accounts deployed through the public workforce development system, strengthening the quality standards for eligible training providers and programs.
 - » Expand access to alternative private financing approaches, such as outcomes-based loans and income share agreements, that tie education and training expenses to the income earned after completion; establish clear and strong regulatory guardrails to ensure that providers don't take advantage of students.
- **Strengthen pathways to economic success by expanding access to education, skills development, and work supports for people with lower incomes:**
 - » Reduce financial burdens and persistent obstacles to postsecondary education and training and workforce programs by expanding access to child care, transportation, food, mental health, and technology assistance.
 - » Expand access to employment and training supports for people who qualify for public benefits with common sets of intake processes and standards for eligibility, and make education and training allowable activities for public assistance work requirements.
- » Mitigate the “benefits cliff” effect, where public benefits drop off as earnings increase, resulting in a net decrease to household income.
- **Enable fair chances at economic advancement for people with a history of arrest, conviction, community supervision, or incarceration:**
 - » Support education and training opportunities by increasing funding for prison-based programs, and encourage greater participation by granting sentence reductions for people who complete programs.
 - » Remove barriers to employment and wealth-building for people while incarcerated by lifting restrictions on private employer hiring and market-rate wages, and by enhancing infrastructure to enable remote work.
 - » Level the playing field for obtaining quality jobs post-release by adopting fair chance hiring laws that extend worker protections and limit employer liability, and by eliminating roadblocks to professional or occupational licenses.
 - » Ensure access to foundational mobility supports by making greater investments in re-entry services and eliminating barriers to public assistance.
 - » Build infrastructure for data reporting, transparency, and systems accountability to harness the whole government to reduce barriers to economic advancement.