

PUTTING EDUCATION TO WORK: THE TEXAS TRI-AGENCY

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PUTTING EDUCATION TO WORK: THE TEXAS TRI-AGENCY

The workforce and public education are profoundly connected. Texas depends on a talented workforce to fuel its economy, and Texans depend on our public education system to prepare them for the jobs of today and tomorrow. But unfortunately, workforce and public education systems often operate independently, making innovation and improvement difficult.

Texans deserve transparent, accurate, and comprehensive data about education and workforce pathways.

Between now and 2036, when the state will observe its bicentennial, over [70% of the jobs in Texas](#) will require a postsecondary credential. But far too few Texas students will possess those credentials. Only 22% of Texas eighth graders currently earn a postsecondary degree or credentials within six years of high school graduation. That costs them more than \$100 billion in future earning potential.

The good news is that Texas leaders are committed to addressing these challenges. Over the last several years, Texas has prioritized building a strong workforce by investing in cross agency collaboration, modernizing data systems, and making essential information about credentials public, easily accessible, and actionable. A combination of legislation and leadership made it possible for the education and workforce systems to begin working together differently to create opportunities for Texans.

What is the Texas Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative?

The [Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative](#) brings together the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC).

The Tri-Agency is focused on [three priorities](#):

Pathways: Support efficient and flexible pathways to earning degrees, certificates, and other credentials linked to high-wage, in-demand jobs.

Support: Ensure students receive the support necessary to succeed at all stages of their education in their transitions to the workforce.

Infrastructure: Create a robust infrastructure for interagency collaboration around common goals, data, and processes to ensure improved student outcomes and meet employers' needs.

Policies that built the Tri-Agency

The Tri-Agency Workforce came together over several years to establish the governance and scope of the initiative. Through a sustained commitment to workforce readiness, laws passed in each session of the Texas Legislature built on previous years to create impactful policy.

- 2015** ● 60x30TX plan, released by THECB, outlined four state goals to reach by 2030 to increase college completion and workforce readiness. The primary goal called for 60% of Texans ages 25 to 34 to have a certificate or degree.
- 2016** ● Gov. Greg Abbott established the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative, formally charging the three commissioners to work together to address state workforce needs.
- The Tri-Agency released its [first report with recommendations](#).
- 2019** ● House Bill 3 (HB 3), a wide-ranging education finance act that included a focus on improving college, career, and military readiness and funding for career and technical education (CTE), passed. Abbott charged the three agencies – the TEA, the THECB, and the TWC – to work together to implement the legislation.
- 2020** ● Abbott issued [new charges](#) to be addressed by the Tri-Agency, published a [progress report](#), and released a [second report with recommendations](#).
- 2021** ● The governor signed three bills into law that transformed collaboration between the three agencies and paved the way for future legislative progress.
- [HB 3767](#), which formalized the Tri-Agency and called for aligned workforce goals and strategies.
 - [Senate Bill 788](#) (SB 788), which formalized a data sharing template.
 - [SB 1230](#), which established the Texas Commission on Community College Finance to make recommendations for the 2023 legislative session.
- 2022** ● The THECB approved its strategic plan *Building a Talent Strong Texas*. It updated 60x30TX and included Credentials of Value that prepare graduates for careers with strong earning potential.
- Tri-Agency released updated workforce goals and strategies that:
- Developed comprehensive state workforce goals.
 - Developed interagency strategies to achieve the state workforce goals.
 - Required all state agencies to align their workforce budget requests with the state workforce strategies.
- 2023** ● Texas passed several bills focused on improving workforce readiness.
- [HB 8](#) provided significant investments to community colleges and new funding that incentivizes pathways to higher quality and in-demand jobs.
 - [HB 1703](#) improves the Texas Workforce Development Evaluation System through better data collection and analysis centered around attainment of a family-sustaining wage.
 - [HB 4451](#) established data and analysis needed to expand apprenticeships in emerging and high-demand industries.
 - [HB 1755](#) creates the Lone Star Workforce of the Future Fund to provide Texans with the skills needed to earn a job with a family-sustaining wage.

Stakeholders and accountability

Recognizing a need to support Texas and the growing economy, state leaders spotlighted the urgency of addressing workforce readiness with policy solutions.

- Key staffers in the Legislature, agencies, and executive branch understood the significance of collaborative, accessible, and transparent data systems and created the **foundation for awareness**.
- Abbott's **executive voice and commitment** to a robust Texas workforce paved the way for legislation and action.
- Committed **advocates teamed up to ensure that policymakers** had the information about how the Tri-Agency can serve Texans for years to come. Stakeholders in the governor's office, the three agencies, and nonprofit partners helped to build a strong base of support for the Tri-Agency.
- The three agency **commissioners believed in the vision** and committed to the required collaboration and data sharing across their agencies.
- The **business community advocated for and rallied around** the effort to better support employers' current and long-term workforce needs.
- **Legislators acted** to author bills that formalized the Tri-Agency's efforts, supported data modernization efforts, and continued to build on the Tri-Agency's existing work.

Texas benefitted from alignment of its leaders around the vision for this idea. But informed and organized advocates helped keep the effort on track. Texas employed several policy tools – both via state law and via mandates from Abbott – that supported the shared vision for Texas's workforce and provided necessary governance and accountability to ensure progress. External stakeholders rallied around the vision and helped communicate why codified legislation was critical.

In [HB 3767](#), the Legislature codified a shared purpose for the Tri-Agency and called for the development of strong governance policies and practices, as detailed in Appendix A. They included the following:

- Establish an internet-based resource for the initiative with annually updated progress toward goals, data on the outcomes of students in the workforce training programs, and tools to explore and identify careers and related training opportunities.
- Provide public schools and institutions of higher education outcome reporting for students enrolled in a career education or training program.
- Create a public, web-based credential library for the credentials that are provided, overseen, or funded by the state and are aligned with recognized skills and industry standards.
- Develop and regularly update a shared list of priority career pathways tailored toward regional and statewide target occupations, new emerging industries and specialty occupations, and upskilling opportunities with wage improvements.
- Hold, at a minimum, quarterly discussions between the leaders of each agency.
- Align goals that include attainment targets for jobs that pay self-sufficient wages, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and gender; provide local priorities; and provide collaborative planning with local employers, public higher education institutions, and workforce development boards.
- Align strategies that expand work-based learning and articulate how the state can best leverage state and federal funding for career education and training programs.
- Require that agencies report to the Legislature how federal or state funding for career education and training programs are advancing the state's workforce development goals.
- Share data agreements and create a strategic plan for a data repository that automatically matches student data between the agencies and provides secure reporting and analysis.

While there had always been a collegial nature between the three agencies, HB 3767 shifted their work from opportunistic collaboration to committed action because of the new accountability for progress embedded in the law.

The agencies set common goals, proactively collaborated, met regularly, and created common resources to support Texas' education and workforce needs more efficiently and comprehensively.

For example, the Tri-Agency developed a joint [Work-Based Learning Framework](#) to cover the entire education-to-workforce scope. Previously, the three agencies would have each created their own separate frameworks that may have overlapped but likely not fully aligned. Instead, leadership and staff in each agency operate under a shared vision created via the Tri-Agency structure.

Two major accomplishments to date

Creating the Tri-Agency set in motion collaboration and transparency that led to resources and tools that will create meaningful change for Texans, including two significant early wins.

Win #1: Aligned, outcomes-driven workforce development goals

The Tri-Agency released the first-ever [state workforce development goals and strategies](#). Creating these goals and strategies required the agencies to work together to develop, verbalize, and agree on a shared vision and outcomes to work toward.

Through this process, the Tri-Agency built on previous efforts like 60x30TX to become more specific about what it would achieve, whom it would serve, how it would get there, and measures of success. The goals set precise and measurable targets with an emphasis on pathways to high-demand occupations, completion of credentials of value, early childhood to postsecondary student outcomes, and improving data libraries, infrastructure, and dashboards for agency, stakeholder, and public analysis. The goals and strategies are detailed in Appendix B.

This process resulted in a shared understanding of the Tri-Agency's purpose and a joint commitment to meet that purpose. It also provides Texans and policymakers accountability to know what the agency is working toward and by when.

Win #2: Comprehensive credential library

Developing a publicly accessible library of essential information about credentials (diplomas, certificates, certifications, digital badges, apprenticeships, licenses, and degrees) was a foundational goal of HB 3767 and a priority for the Tri-Agency. This effort started under the THECB, which early on recognized the need to define and identify credentials of value. The Tri-Agency team – with support from external organizations like [Credential Engine](#) and [Texas 2036](#) – is now working to build the library.

[Credential Engine](#), a key partner in this work, will house the [library](#) of credentials within its open Credential Registry, which serves as a foundational database for the effort. They will start by incorporating data from the three agencies about the credentials provided, overseen, or funded with public money. Then, Credential Engine will work with organizations like [Texas 2036](#), regions, cities, and institutions to publish additional data to get richer pictures of the credential ecosystem. This may include data about providers not in public-funding streams as well as data about competencies, skills, transfer values, pathways, assessments used or required, and support services available at the provider (tutoring, counseling, food banks, etc.).

The library will help Texans navigate a pathway to good jobs by mapping previous training and assessments to credentials and possible jobs, particularly in high demand (and high wage) fields. The library will empower Texans with better evidence for decision-making. The tool also allows for regional collaborations and customizations as more institutions partner with the library, providing a ripe opportunity for city and regional leaders to create more personalized pathways that meet local needs.

Looking forward

This work is not finished in Texas, and state leaders should prioritize the following areas:

Governance of capacity and resources:

The structure of the Tri-Agency, with its publicly reported measurable goals and the efforts of staff members from each agency, has turned this work from talking points to action. Thanks to HB 3767, the purpose and goals for this collaboration are now codified in legislation, which helps align the efforts of each state agency around shared goals and strategies.

Smart investments in capacity – like flexibility provided to the agencies on caps on full-time employees – have been especially meaningful. That allowed the agencies to work within existing staffing structures and the needed appropriations to update and modernize agencies' data systems, which made data sharing much easier.

However, the Tri-Agency operates with very limited dedicated staff, a significant risk to achieving the vision for the agency. A clear vision is essential, but it becomes meaningless without people to execute it fully.

The George W. Bush Institute's [rankings of state longitudinal data systems](#) detail the importance of strong governance for capacity and resources, an area where Texas scores only a 2 out of 4. Texas scores a 3 out of 4 on governance for coordinated vision, a 4 out of 4 on accessibility and data-driven policy, and a 3 out of 4 for transparency and reporting. The [50 state ratings](#) provide additional details and comparisons.

Stakeholder engagement:

Texas benefitted from a wide range of stakeholders who believed in this effort, from Abbott to agency commissioners to staffers to nonprofit partners. Given the scope of change – and the collaboration required for implementation – having an expansive list of supporters was critical. That allowed this effort to move from being a governor's charge to a sustained effort, and it's important that champions continue to talk about the Tri-Agency's value with state leadership.

Data:

The Tri-Agency is based on the idea that quality outcome data about credentials, skills, jobs, and wages belong to all Texans. No agency or department can own or hoard data, a philosophy that allows for the creation of tools useful to the public, like the Credential Library. Staying committed to this principle of data as a public good is important.

Vision and persistence:

This is complex work, and it is not possible to transform systems or agencies in a single legislative session. Texas has benefitted – and will continue to benefit – from the governor's vision, the commissioners' leadership, the support of legislators, and the execution efforts of staff and partners over time. It will be important to ensure that the resources allocated to this work match the scope of the vision for this effort.

APPENDIX A. HB 3767 OVERVIEW

Purpose:

1. Ensure state and federal education and workforce funds are aligned to achieve state workforce development goals.
2. Align career education and training programs to workforce demands.
3. Enable local and state policymakers to identify the workforce outcomes of participants in career education and training programs and progress toward the state workforce goals.

Components of the law:

Agreements:

Enter into one or more agreements for:

1. Sharing and matching relevant data.
2. Coordinating the assignment of existing staff and other resources.
3. Time spent by an employee on the Tri-Agency initiatives is not included in the number of full-time employees allotted to each agency.

Quarterly discussion:

4. Discuss the work of the initiative at least once per quarter.

Strategic plan for workforce data repository:

5. Develop a strategic plan for the data repository for education and workforce data that:
 - a. Automatically matches records between agencies at the student level.
 - b. Creates publicly available tools and resources on the outcomes of participants, including graduation rates, student debt, employment status, industry of employment, and earnings over time, disaggregated to the extent possible.
 - c. Makes timely student data available to authorized institutions.
 - d. Creates and supports a secure portal through which authorized personnel of approved entities can view and analyze comprehensive longitudinal and current matched data.

State workforce development goals and strategies:

6. The Tri-Agency will develop and post on each agency's website the state workforce development goals and coordinated interagency strategies.
7. The goals must:
 - a. Be developed in consultation with employers.
 - b. Include goals for attainment of employment in jobs that pay self-sufficient wages.

- c. Be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and gender for each region.
 - d. Provide local priorities consistent with state goals.
 - e. Provide for collaborative planning with local employers, public schools, institutions of higher education, and local workforce development boards.
8. The strategies must:
- a. Include expanding work-based learning.
 - b. Articulate the ways the state can best leverage state and federal funding for career education and training programs guided by:
 - i. Education and workforce data.
 - ii. Evidence of success and considerations of cost-effectiveness.
 - iii. Prioritized occupational classification, including all target occupations and critical career pathways.
9. Update the goals and strategies at least every four years (in consultation with employers).
10. Update a list of career pathways every two years that details (in consultation with employers):
- a. Target occupations, including current needs in a region.
 - b. Critical career pathways that reflect new emerging industries or pathways to better wages.

Credential Library:

11. Establish a publicly accessible web-based library of credentials (diplomas, certificates, certifications, digital badges, apprenticeships, licenses, or degrees) that are:
- a. Delivered, issued, funded, or governed by the state.
 - b. Aligned with recognized skills and industry standards.
12. May designate a host agency or operating entity for the Library.
13. In establishing, shall solicit input from the agency and relevant stakeholders.

Internet-based resources:

14. Establish internet-based resources that:
- a. Create a central website for the initiative.
 - b. Have a unified dashboard updated annually that reports progress toward workforce development goals both statewide and disaggregated by public school, public school campus, institution of higher education, workforce region, and county.
 - c. Produce data on the outcomes of students who participate in careers education and training programs (disaggregated).
 - d. Provide guidance supporting the use of data.

e. Tools enabling states residents to:

- i. Explore careers that match their education and skills and lead to a self-sufficient wage.
- ii. Identify and evaluate education and training opportunities related to interests.
- iii. Connect to available jobs.

f. Tools to support joint program planning for:

- i. The agency.
- ii. Public schools, institutions of higher education, local workforce development boards, and partnering entities.

Student success reporting:

15. The agency shall make available to each public school and institution of higher education information possessed by the agency regarding the success of students previously enrolled in a career education and training program offered by the school or institution.

Targeted funding to address state goals:

16. A state agency that receives federal or state funding for career education and training programs must describe how the agency's career education and training programs and expenditures align with the state workforce development goals.

Self-sufficient wage:

17. The Tri-Agency shall determine for each county the wage that constitutes a self-sufficient wage.

18. This must be based on a common standard that reflects the regionally adjusted minimum employment earnings necessary to meet a family's basic needs while also maintaining self-sufficiency.

APPENDIX B. TRI-AGENCY WORKFORCE INITIATIVE GOALS AND STRATEGIES



Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative Goals and Strategies

As directed by HB 3767, the 87th Texas Legislature, Regular Session, the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative, a collaboration among the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission, presents state workforce development strategies for public review and comment.

The Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative appreciates public comments provided on the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative Goals and presents updated goals here. Please note that reporting on the goals will include data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and region/geography.

PRIORITY 1

GOALS

1. 60% of Texans ages 25-34 will have a degree, certificate, or other postsecondary credential of value by 2030, and 60% of Texans ages 35-64 will have a degree, certificate, or other post-secondary credential of value by 2030.
2. To ensure that employers have the qualified workers needed, all Texans will have access to information, education, and training necessary to identify and pursue pathways to employment in high-demand occupations.

STRATEGIES

Strategy 1.1: Improve the ability of the agencies to effectively engage stakeholders and meet the talent needs of employers by:

- Identifying and monitoring emerging workforce needs for high- and middle-skilled jobs in high-demand and/or high-growth industries;
- Integrating stakeholder input into the design and implementation of efficient pathways;
- Developing efficient processes for sharing employer input on current and emerging workforce needs across agencies;
- Coordinating employer engagement activities across the agencies and the Texas Workforce Investment Council; and
- Empowering and supporting partnerships among regional education and workforce system stakeholders.

Strategy 1.2: Define credentials of value for all education and training providers and provide guidance on the incorporation of credentials of value within education and training programs statewide.

Strategy 1.3: Define efficient pathways to employment in high-demand occupations, including providing guidance for local implementation of these pathways.

Strategy 1.4: Expand opportunities for work-based learning experiences by:

- Creating a Tri-Agency framework to guide the development of high-quality work-based learning;
- Developing toolkits and other supports for implementation; and
- Building the capacity of education and workforce system stakeholders to develop effective and efficient systems for brokering connections among industry, education, and workforce partners.

Strategy 1.5: Increase midcareer reskilling and upskilling opportunities through public institutions of higher education and other educational settings.

Strategy 1.6: Incentivize local adoption of efficient pathways, including credentials of value and quality work-based learning, by:

- Providing guidance and resources to support local adoption;
- Leveraging existing structures to better connect regional education and workforce institutions and systems; and
- Supporting the development of regional education-workforce partnerships and systems.

Strategy 1.7: Collaborate across agencies to develop shared monitoring processes to ensure fidelity of implementation of efficient pathways.

PRIORITY 2

GOALS

1. By August 2024, strengthen and expand coordination within the state's mixed-delivery early childhood education system to facilitate increased access to high-quality education for young children to support kindergarten readiness. Specific goals include:

- 70% of children enrolled in TWC's child-care services will be enrolled in high quality programs.
- 12% increase in prekindergarten enrollment for 3-year-olds and 7% increase in pre-K enrollment for 4-year-olds (from the 2021-2022 school year to the 2022-2023 school year).
- 15% increase in LEAs meeting all high-quality pre-kindergarten indicators (from the 2021-2022 school year to the 2022-2023 school year).
- 500 new prekindergarten partnership classrooms established.

2. Increase percentages of students meeting achievement benchmarks¹ as follows:

- Increase 3rd-grade reading and math outcomes for all students while closing achievement gaps;
- Increase student academic growth rates for all students while closing achievement gaps; and
- Increase percentages of students graduating and ready for college, career, and military while closing achievement gaps.

3. 550,000 students will complete postsecondary credentials of value each year.

- Postsecondary credentials of value are defined based on graduates' typical earnings and net costs, compared to typical earnings of high school graduates.

¹ Numeric targets became available summer 2022.

- 95% of graduates have either no undergraduate student loan debt at all or manageable levels of debt² in relation to their potential earnings.

STRATEGIES

Strategy 2.1: Ensure students and families have the support, tools, and resources needed to achieve education and career success by:

- Supporting early childhood education;
- Developing foundational literacy pedagogy, and high school and postsecondary readiness in middle school; and
- Designing effective family engagement strategies.

Strategy 2.2: Strengthen and expand prekindergarten, including within the state’s early childhood mixed delivery system, through the development of additional prekindergarten partnership classrooms.

Strategy 2.3: Expand access to effective college and career advising by:

- Developing a shared framework for high-quality advising throughout the education and workforce continuum;
- Streamlining and modernizing advising offerings and services for students to support informed decision-making about postsecondary education and careers; and
- Offering professional development to educators, advisers, and school counselors.

Strategy 2.4: Reduce financial barriers in education by:

- Strengthening the Texas financial aid system, especially to increase predictability and transparency of financial aid awards and facilitate students’ ability to complete undergraduate credentials with no or manageable debt; and
- Bolstering financial literacy education, including improved education for students and training for educators about financial aid opportunities, student debt management, and opportunities for students to pursue credentials of value.

Strategy 2.5: Promote and support high-quality teaching and learning by:

- Recruiting, supporting and retaining a pipeline of skilled teachers, including providing financial supports to Texans who pursue careers in teaching;
- Improving instructional models;
- Strengthening professional development to promote the use of effective instructional models and the effective use of technology in teaching and learning; and
- Supporting bilingual education and dual language immersion strategies.

PRIORITY 3

GOALS

1. Identify gaps in agencies’ data collections and develop a plan to address any such gaps, including recommendations of statutory changes needed to do so, by January 2023.

² Manageable debt would be defined in terms of individual graduates’ abilities to pay off their student loans given typical earnings for credential holders.

2. Design an integrated educational and workforce data infrastructure with a shared data governance policy by January 2023.
3. Create publicly available and user-friendly data dashboards that report education and workforce outcomes data aligned to Tri-Agency priorities and disaggregated by income, race, ethnicity, gender, and region by June 2024.
4. Establish integrated project management tools and processes for Tri-Agency shared initiatives by January 2023.
5. Develop a plan by January 2023 for the creation of a state credential library and the development and implementation of a shared process through which credentials of value, including industry-based certifications, will be defined, identified, and promoted across the agencies.

STRATEGIES:

Strategy 3.1: Align statewide education and workforce systems with statewide priorities and goals by:

- Creating a shared approach for financial supports for Tri-Agency goals and strategies, including coordinated funding to better leverage resources; and
- Collaborating across agencies to communicate symbiotic priorities to other state leaders and systems, including the Texas Legislature.

Strategy 3.2: Make educational and workforce data accessible and useful to the public, stakeholders, and decision-makers by:

- Developing a modern, secure data infrastructure to support decision-making by students and families, educators, workforce stakeholders, and policymakers while protecting individual student privacy;
- Integrating data across systems and coordinating across agency research and development efforts; and
- Creating publicly available and user-friendly data dashboards that report education and workforce outcomes data aligned to Tri-Agency priorities.

Strategy 3.3: Ensure coordination and collaboration across all three agencies' operations by:

- Adopting and working toward shared outcomes;
- Developing shared processes, including planning and monitoring processes, and technology infrastructure; and
- Creating clear communication channels.

Strategy 3.4: Develop a communications and outreach plan focused on informing the public about Tri-Agency activities, including maintaining and updating the Tri-Agency website to provide up to date information and available resources.



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