

PROMOTING INNOVATIONS TO 21ST CENTURY CAREERS
Questions and Answers

Q: What does this bill do?

A: The Promoting Innovations to 21st Century Careers Act creates a \$912 million federal grant program designed to spark discussions about careers available in communities across the country – and then to help identify and create ways to prepare interested students to pursue those careers.

Q: How would it work?

A: State and regional leaders in education, business, labor, and workforce could apply for grants to create partnerships, study the workforce needs in their communities, and develop programs that prepare students to be successful in those careers.

The act encourages these groups to go on to use the grants to create and invest in a variety of hands-on programs that give students a chance to experience what it's like to work in fields they are interested in – and prepare them for high school graduation and further education, including registered apprenticeships. Those opportunities could include:

- Hands-on job-training partnerships or internships that link students with area businesses;
- Training for teachers on how to incorporate real-world career skills with core academic courses;
- Enhanced guidance-counseling and career-education programs that help students get accurate, up-to-date information about all career opportunities – and to learn the skills they will need to apply for jobs and to get further schooling.

The idea is to engage students' interest in a wide array of potential careers, and ensure they have access to coursework and real-world experiences that will position them to pursue jobs in those fields.

Q: Who will oversee this initiative?

A: The bill creates a new National Academic and Career Innovation Center under an agreement with the Education, Labor and Commerce departments. The center would have the authority and the flexibility to develop coherent and comprehensive strategies across disciplines to better prepare America's future workforce and galvanize the resources to evaluate, document, and inform every stakeholder about results.

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Q: How will you measure success?

A: Each grant recipient will be required to report to the National Academic and Career Innovation Center. The center will evaluate the success of the grantees' efforts based on whether students are:

- Graduating from high school;
- Earning degrees or credentials;
- Entering postsecondary education, or going on to get a job;
- And how much students earn when they enter the workforce.

The evaluation will determine whether a grantee gets a renewal or an extension.

In addition, the center will help collect a record of best practices and help other regions put those activities in place.

Q: The bill talks about “career pathways” for high school students; what does that mean?

A: The bill brings together educators, and industry, workforce, and economic development leaders to identify in-demand careers and then help interested students enter those fields by creating “career pathways.” In essence, career pathways are the set of academic and career-related courses and services students could participate in. Under the bill, the goals are to:

- Prepare students to meet state academic standards and requirements for high school graduation;
- Align high school requirements with postsecondary education institutions' entrance requirements and the needs of high-skill, high-demand industries in the region or state;
- Provide necessary flexibility, since high school students often change their areas of interest throughout high school;
- Offer a full range of postsecondary options so that students are not limited when they graduate from high school; and
- Help a student earn a high school diploma and at least one postsecondary credential that could include a two- or four-year degree, an apprenticeship credential, or occupational certificate or license.

Q: Will all high school students be required to participate in career pathways?

A: No. Student participation is completely voluntary, as is the participation of states and regions.

Q: What if a student changes his or her mind about a career pathway over time? Will he or she be stuck learning something they no longer have interest in?

A: Career pathways should be designed to provide a broad array of academic and career opportunities with the recognition that most high school students will change their minds. Students will have access to quality information about postsecondary education and career options available to them and will acquire the skills they need to take advantage of those options.

Q: Are all states eligible to apply for a grant?

A: Yes. Any state can choose to apply – either for a one-year planning grant to develop a strategy for career pathways; or, if the state partnership already has such a strategy in place, it can apply for a five-year implementation grant.

Q: How do you define a region eligible to apply for funds from its state?

A: Regions define their boundaries in plans they submit to the state partnership for approval. Regions might choose a natural labor market as their boundary, or a workforce development area, an economic development area, or even a consortium of school districts. Regions can cross state boundaries, but they must work out how education activities will be coordinated despite state differences.

Q: Won't career pathways partnerships simply add a new layer of bureaucracy?

A: No. Rather than create a new structure, states and regions are encouraged to build on what works best for them by adopting existing partnerships such as P-16 or P-20 councils, workforce investment boards, economic development councils, and business-education partnerships that include key stakeholders in career pathway development.

Q: Why is a career pathway approach important to high school age youth?

A: Recent studies show that young adults need similar skills sets to succeed in college and on the job. In addition to streamlining the transition from high school to postsecondary education and careers, pathways integrate rigorous academic and career learning so that high school students reach high academic standards while learning about real-world applications. High school age youth also will learn more about the career options available to them, particularly in thriving industries that hold real promise for quality jobs.

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Q: Isn't a high school diploma enough for most students to be successful?

A: Not necessarily. Most high-wage jobs require some postsecondary education. Some economists estimate that by 2012 there will be a shortage of more than 7 million workers with an associate degree or higher. Education pays – studies show that adults with higher degrees earn more money.

Q: Going to college is part of the American dream. Shouldn't we focus our resources on making this happen?

A: One of the critical goals of this bill is to ensure that young people graduate from high school, enter postsecondary education, and acquire a degree or industry-recognized credential. While postsecondary education is critical to any young person's success in building a family-supporting career over the long term, careers in high-skill, high-demand industries require varying types of postsecondary credentials. The bill also helps students learn about the educational requirements and options for high-skill, well-paying careers by providing them with quality career-related information and exploration opportunities. It also supports a rigorous, more-engaging high school experience so that young people are prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and are equipped with the skills they need to take advantage of a dynamic economy.

Q: What about the young people who dropped out of school – can they participate in and benefit from career pathways?

A: Youth who have dropped out of school often need a structured and engaging learning experience to successfully reenter high school and attain their diploma. Career pathways provides that experience. The bill requires that regional partnerships develop a way to allow students who have dropped out to participate in pathways. And it asks regional partnerships to include existing community services to help at-risk students. In addition, partnerships are encouraged to create one-on-one mentorships between these young people and responsible, caring adult role models in their communities.

Q: Does career pathways accommodate a broad range of models such as Career Academies, dual enrollment programs, and Perkins Programs of Study?

A: Absolutely. Many states across the country have already invested in similar models that work well for their students and their communities. This bill is designed to build upon their success and spark innovation around new ideas that help youth succeed beyond high school.

Q: Why is Promoting Innovations to 21st Century Careers needed when the Workforce Investment Act, No Child Left Behind, and Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act already exist?

A: Preparing future generations of highly educated and skilled individuals means addressing complex education, employment and social challenges, and that generally requires many stakeholders and partners. This bill encourages collaboration among state and regional stakeholders and partners to align relevant programs authorized under each separate piece of legislation and to leverage resources around common goals – something that is very difficult to achieve under an individual program. This initiative complements and builds upon each of the current programs. It does not reauthorize any of these or other federal laws; rather it aims to build bridges between the programs to help students transition smoothly from high school to postsecondary education and into skilled careers.

Q: Isn't Promoting Innovations to 21st Century Careers just another form of the controversial and, to many, failed School to Work program? If it isn't, how does it differ?

A: Promoting Innovations to 21st Century Careers is not School to Work. The legislation does not involve career majors, nor is it intended for every student. It does, however, take several lessons about what worked from the program:

- Promoting Innovations to 21st Century Careers links to the high academic standards, academic achievement outcomes data, and graduation data required under the No Child Left Behind Act to ensure that all students are on track to graduate from high school prepared for the full range of postsecondary education options.
- It encourages high school students to explore a variety of academic and career-related options throughout high school, while meeting state academic and graduation requirements, preparing for postsecondary education, and acquiring the skills necessary to succeed in 21st Century careers.
- Participation in pathways at the state, regional, and individual high school student levels is completely voluntary.

As state and regional partnerships approach the end of their grants, they will fund increasingly larger portions to sustain the initiative.

Q: Why is the focus on high-skill, high-demand careers?

A: Today's workforce needs are evolving as a result of the global economy. Employers say they cannot find enough American workers trained to fill the jobs available. Focusing career pathways on high-skill, high-demand careers not only will improve the U.S. economy by increasing America's skilled workforce, but it will also prepare youth for sustainable and family-supporting careers in thriving industries. Students, workers and industry win in the long run with this approach.

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Q: How will career pathways address the needs of business and industry?

A: Career pathways ultimately provide businesses and employers with better-prepared workers who have the skills and credentials necessary to be successful in their careers. This proposal seeks to help businesses – particularly those that lack high-skill, high-demand workers – find skilled workers without having to look beyond our own country and communities. This proposal ensures that businesses are included in the discussion about the skills students need in the 21st century workforce and how to help them get those skills.

Q: How can career pathway initiatives continue beyond the life of the federal grant?

A: This bill encourages and supports innovation from the ground up, and it brings key stakeholders to the table, including representatives from secondary education, postsecondary education, workforce development, labor, business, and economic development. To increase the sustainability of pathways initiatives, states and regions are encouraged to build upon existing successful partnerships. The bill encourages the mutual commitment and accountability of all stakeholders to make pathways a success, which should increase the likelihood of sustaining practices that work.

Q: How does career pathways professional development for teachers, counselors, and administrative personnel complement existing efforts to help teachers develop skills that enable them to help students meet academic standards?

A: Professional development on career pathways and related activities must be coordinated with existing professional development efforts to avoid unnecessary duplication.

Q: Why aren't low-skill or low-earning adults included in this career pathway proposal when they have significant skills development needs?

A: While this bill focuses on young adults, pathways can benefit many workers, especially those who are low-skilled or low-earning. This concept can also enhance future conversations on workforce development.