SCORE

FUTURE FORWARD SUMMIT | CONNECTING EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITY

From Vision to Action: Building Stronger Pathways to Economic Independence

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Tennessee Has Momentum. Now It's Time to Align, Accelerate, and Scale.

"Tennessee's future depends on our ability to prepare every student for the jobs and opportunities of tomorrow. When we invest in locally driven innovation and come together across sectors, we can build pathways that are clear, connected, and aligned to workforce needs."

— Sen. Bill Frist, M.D., SCORE's Chairman and Founder

For the third time, the Future Forward Summit series brought together leaders from K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce development, industry, philanthropy, and state government to advance stronger education-to-career pathways that lead to economic independence for Tennessee students. The stakes are real: While 92 of every 100 ninth graders graduate from high school, only 32 of every 100 complete a postsecondary degree or credential in Tennessee within six years.[1] For every available worker in Tennessee, there are almost 1.4 job openings, more than half of Tennessee business leaders report they cannot find the qualified talent they need, and nearly half of the credentials students earn are not aligned to high-demand occupations.[2] These challenges are becoming more urgent as rapid technological change, evolving workforce demands, and increasing economic competition reshape what students need to succeed in today's economy.

Tennessee has the momentum to meet this moment. The state now ranks first in the South for K-12 academic achievement, postsecondary attainment has grown from 31.8% in 2009 to 48.1% today, and innovative education-to-career partnerships are generating proof points across the state.[3]

The 2026 Future Forward Summit explored how Tennessee can build on meaningful progress to turn shared vision into action and impact. Across panel discussions, keynote presentations, and breakout sessions, five key takeaways emerged. Together, they offer a roadmap for helping more Tennessee students access pathways to economic independence and long-term success.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2026 FUTURE FORWARD SUMMIT

1. Credentials Must be Aligned to Outcomes
2. To Advance Coherent Pathways, Tennessee Must "Smash Silos"
3. Career-Connected Learning Should be the Norm, Not the Exception
4. Preparing Students for the Future Requires Building Adaptability
5. Proof Points Need the Right Conditions to Scale to Statewide Impact

1. CREDENTIALS MUST BE ALIGNED TO OUTCOMES

> **"When we tell students, 'You just have to get a credential,' we're lying to them. We're not giving them the actual data and information they need to make informed choices. You need alignment between policy, funding, and data to build the systems together to incentivize the outcomes that we want."**
>
> — Kelly McManus, Executive Vice President of Education, Arnold Ventures

Enrollment, completion, and attainment remain important measures of progress, but speakers at the summit emphasized these must be paired with measures of how a credential leads to employment, economic mobility, and long-term career success. Earnings, job outlook, and the foundation to build toward further education and career advancement over time are the outcomes that matter most.

More than half of Tennessee business leaders report they cannot find enough qualified local talent to meet their workforce needs, and more than half of those leaders identify improving training and education as the top action the state should take.[4] The problem is not that students are failing to pursue education; it is that too many education and credential pathways are not yet leading to the success outcomes that students need and employers require. Closing this gap means aligning education experiences, credential value, and economic opportunity from the start.

Solutions to Explore

- Expand the use of Tennessee's Credential Impact Framework to emphasize earnings, job outlook, and stackability outcomes as key measures of student economic opportunity — not just relying on the measures of postsecondary completion and attainment.
- Explore opportunities to align postsecondary funding and incentives more closely with career outcomes.
- Strengthen student-facing advising tools and labor market information so students and families can make informed decisions about which credentials and pathways lead to economic opportunity.
- Continue advancing completion goals while placing greater emphasis on economic independence, credential value, and workforce relevance.

2. TO ADVANCE CONNECTED PATHWAYS, TENNESSEE MUST "SMASH SILOS"

> **"I consider myself a silo smasher, and what I mean by that is we often just work in silos. In government, we do our thing. In schools, they do their thing. Industry does their thing. And we don't really talk to each other. We don't collaborate. And the result is that we have inefficiencies. We have lost opportunities. The great thing is now we can all talk and now we all work together. And when that happens, amazing things can occur. And a lot of the successes and the things that we've been able to do in Knox County [are] simply the result of when we talk to each other, we get on the same page, and we all start rowing in the same direction."**
>
> — Mayor Glenn Jacobs, Knox County

Students need systems that work together instead of asking them to navigate disconnected pathways on their own. Throughout the summit, leaders emphasized that students should experience education and workforce systems as a single journey, but those systems are often designed and operated in silos. Creating clear, connected pathways — or "smashing silos" — requires building stronger partnerships across K-12, postsecondary, and industry to create structures that support collaboration beyond individual initiatives or programs. Looking ahead, the conversation must focus on how Tennessee builds the systems, incentives, and cross-sector partnerships necessary to implement alignment in practice.

Solutions to Explore

- Align education, workforce, and economic development priorities around common goals and outcomes.
- Expand regional and local pathway partnerships that lead to degrees and credentials of value.
- Reimagine learning experiences in K-12 and postsecondary that support student opportunity and workforce needs, including work-based learning and early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs).
- Build shared data infrastructure across education, workforce, and economic development systems so that pathway participation, credential value, and student transition outcomes are visible and actionable at the state, regional, and local levels.
- Expand employer engagement beyond advisory roles into local and regional pathway co-design, as well as continuous meaningful engagement at the systems level.

3. CAREER-CONNECTED LEARNING AND HIGH-QUALITY ADVISING SHOULD BE THE NORM, NOT THE EXCEPTION

> **"By high school graduation, every student should be able to say: I know who I am, I know where I'm going, and I know who can help me get there."**
>
> — A Launchpad for Life: A Vision for Purposeful Pathways report, Commission on Purposeful Pathways

Career-connected learning is a foundational element of what every student needs to successfully move from education to economic independence. The Commission on Purposeful Pathways, whose recommendations were featured in a summit breakout session, identified three essential components of a student-centered pathway system: high-quality advising, accelerated learning opportunities, and career-connected learning. Critically, the commission members shared at the summit that these components should be woven into the experience of every student, beginning well before high school graduation.

Despite significant gains in K-12 achievement and high school graduation rates, too many students continue to lose momentum at key transition points. For every 100 students who begin high school in Tennessee, 92 graduate, 56 enroll in college, and only 32 complete a postsecondary degree or credential within six years.[5]

Throughout the summit, speakers emphasized that career-connected learning paired with strong advising can be a powerful tool in increasing pathway program persistence and completion. Every student should have opportunities to explore careers, engage with employers, develop professional networks, participate in work-based learning, and receive individualized advising that connects their interests and strengths to future opportunities.

Solutions to Explore

- Expand access to high-quality work-based learning opportunities statewide, emphasizing employer alignment and skills-building.
- Increase access to EPSOs, including dual enrollment, industry credentials, and advanced coursework that meaningfully accelerate students' progress toward postsecondary credentials.
- Forge and strengthen formal partnerships among K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, and employers so that career-connected learning is embedded in the student experience, not offered as a separate program or add-on.
- Scale youth apprenticeship and earn-and-learn models in high-demand industries.
- Strengthen advising systems and career exploration tools beginning in middle school.
- Support school districts, postsecondary education partners, and employers to build social capital, mentorship, and professional networks into pathway design.
- Explore how funding, financial aid, and other support structures can help support access to degrees and credentials that lead to economic independence.

4. PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE REQUIRES BUILDING ADAPTABILITY

> **" We should be worrying less about whether AI is going to take jobs, and we should be worrying more about whether individuals have the skills to do what their job is going to become. The goal is not to protect static roles from automation but to prepare individuals for a reality where their professional value is defined by their ability to leverage new tools and augment their own capabilities. Just as the advent of spreadsheet software didn't eliminate accounting but instead evolved accountants into data analysts, AI is shifting the cognitive requirements of our work — meaning the most vital skill for the future is the capacity to adapt and deepen our expertise alongside these emerging technologies."**
>
> — Matt Sigelman, President, The Burning Glass Institute

Technological change is reshaping nearly every industry. While artificial intelligence (AI) and automation will continue to transform work, summit participants discussed how adaptability may be one of the most important skills for students to develop.

Employers increasingly value communication, collaboration, problem-solving, leadership, critical thinking, and adaptability alongside technical skills. Students need opportunities to earn valuable credentials, develop durable skills, and demonstrate competencies that align with workforce demand. Many of the most requested skills in today's labor market are these cross-functional competencies that remain valuable regardless of industry or technological change.

Preparing students for the future requires education systems to become more equipped to respond to the ever-changing workforce needs and help students develop the knowledge, skills, and agency needed to continuously grow, apply their learning in new contexts, and keep up with workforce demands. This means building both technical expertise and the capacity to adapt throughout a career, not just at the start.

Solutions to Explore

- Embed durable skills through project-based, experiential, and interdisciplinary learning opportunities across K-12 and postsecondary education.
- Strengthen connections between classroom learning and real-world application.
- Identify in-demand skills for Tennessee employers and use them to support stronger connections and coordination between education and workforce systems for students.
- Use workforce data to regularly evaluate pathway relevance and responsiveness and invest in and expand data-sharing infrastructure that makes labor market information accessible and actionable across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems.
- Support stackable credentials and flexible learning pathways that promote lifelong learning.
- Integrate AI fluency into education pathways as a cross-cutting capability, helping students learn when and how to use AI tools effectively, responsibly, and critically across disciplines.
- Prepare students not only for first jobs but for long-term career navigation and advancement.

5. PROOF POINTS NEED THE RIGHT CONDITIONS TO SCALE TO STATEWIDE IMPACT

> **“ Good programs survive despite the policy environment; they cannot scale without the right policy conditions in place.”**
>
> — Brent Parton, President, CareerWise

Across Tennessee, school districts, postsecondary institutions, employers, and community partners are already demonstrating what effective pathways can look like. Local and regional pathways programs are helping students earn valuable credentials, gain real-world experience, and connect learning to high-demand careers while strengthening regional talent pipelines.

The summit elevated promising proof points that have the potential to teach the field and be scaled statewide — including pathways supported through SCORE’s Future Forward Innovation Grant. In its first year, the grant funded seven education and employer partnerships — spanning healthcare, education, data science, AI, and advanced manufacturing — to design and launch innovative, cross-sector models that enable students to earn high-value credentials that lead to economic independence.

The opportunity ahead is ensuring that successful innovations do not remain isolated examples. Tennessee’s next frontier is creating the conditions necessary for successful models to spread and thrive. Scaling successful pathways requires implementation infrastructure, sustained leadership, aligned policy, meaningful and structured employer partnership, and long-term investment.

Solutions to Explore

- Explore policy solutions that strengthen education-to-career pathways by increasing shared accountability and coordinated vision across K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and economic development systems.
- Identify potential policy levers and infrastructure necessary to scale early postsecondary credential opportunities statewide, including the conditions that allow successful local models to spread beyond their original communities.
- Strengthen regional employer partnerships and sector-based talent strategies.
- Align funding, accountability, and incentive structures to support the scale and long-term sustainability of successful pathway programs and models.
- Leverage the Future Forward Innovation Grant cohort as a blueprint for future pathway development and cross-sector partnership building.

Moving From Vision to Action

Tennessee has the vision and the momentum to lead the nation in building stronger education-to-career pathways. The task ahead is to align and scale efforts so that every student — regardless of where they live — can access clear, connected pathways that lead to economic independence.

Alignment means ensuring that policy, funding, data, and employer partnerships are pointed toward the same outcomes, so the credentials students earn lead to real economic opportunity and the systems meant to serve students work together rather than in isolation. Scale means ensuring that what is working in one community, one sector, or one partnership reaches students in every region of the state.

Building stronger pathways is both a strategy for expanding economic independence for individual students and an economic development strategy for Tennessee. Realizing this vision will require leaders across the state to work together to translate the Future Forward Summit's key takeaways into sustained action, ensuring that every student is prepared for lifelong success.

REFERENCES

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