

CAPITAL CROSSROADS
A VISION FORWARD

PUBLISHED BY CAPITAL CROSSROADS | DECEMBER 2025



Since May 2024, Capital Crossroads has undertaken a bold and collaborative effort to better understand Central Iowa's workforce development ecosystem. This community-driven work was identified as a priority by regional entities like The Greater Des Moines Partnership's DSM Workforce Collaborative and the Capital Crossroads Regional Council.

The culmination of the first phase of this work is the Central Iowa Workforce Development Ecosystem Map: a visual representation and interactive tool designed to highlight the various workforce development supports available to students and adults in pursuit of education, training, and employment in Polk, Dallas, and Warren Counties.

To build and refine the map, Capital Crossroads hosted more than ten multi-sector stakeholder convenings – engaging workforce professionals, educators, nonprofit leaders, business representatives, public sector partners, and community advocates – to gather insights on what is working, what is missing, and how we can work better together to build a more inclusive, robust talent pipeline for our region.

This white paper offers a summary of the insights on strengths, challenges, and opportunities shared throughout those conversations. These reflections will inform the next phase of Capital Crossroads' regional efforts in workforce development and serve as a launching point for continued collaboration and innovation.

Strengths of Central Iowa's Workforce Development Ecosystem

Stakeholders emphasized that Central Iowa has a strong foundation of workforce development supports, as detailed through several of the below examples.

Available Supports for Students and Adults

Central Iowa offers a broad array of workforce development resources serving individuals at all stages, from K-12 students exploring careers to adults seeking new employment opportunities or skills development.

Regional Mindset and Commitment to Collaboration

Central Iowa leaders embrace a strong sense of regional collaboration, recognizing that shared challenges require shared solutions. Stakeholders across sectors understand that by working together, the region is better positioned to design strategies and systems that meet collective needs. This collaborative spirit and willingness to convene diverse groups are key drivers of innovation and resilience across the workforce development ecosystem.

Strong Leadership Development and Networking Opportunities

The region has robust leadership programs and professional networking offerings, including programs designed to be both culturally and industry specific. These programs help foster personal growth, community connection, and professional advancement, contributing to a pipeline of prepared individuals ready to lead and build community in both the private and public sectors. The presence of programs focused on connecting and empowering historically marginalized communities also helps create important access points for underrepresented talent to thrive and lead.

Presence of Work-Based Learning and Career Exploration Programs

Local students benefit from hands-on, immersive learning experiences through established work-based learning and career exploration programs in varied industries. Whether in skilled trades or financial services, these initiatives not only help young people discover career paths with opportunities for growth, but also serve as “best practice” models for other schools and employers to explore and develop their own programs. This active learning approach strengthens the

relevance of classroom education while building the skills, awareness, and confidence students need to succeed in the workforce.

Innovative Public-Private Partnerships

Central Iowa is home to cross-sector partnerships that seek to meet the needs of both education systems and the business community. Initiatives such as the Principal Charity Classic Legacy Project: Career Ready Collective and the Polk County Healthcare Workforce Collaborative are examples of leaders in business, education, and government using a forward-thinking approach to aligning talent development with economic opportunity and market demands. These partnerships are already making strides in creating pathways that are responsive, inclusive, and scalable.



Map Launch Event, March 2025

State-Level Support for Work-Based Learning

Supporting talent development is a stated priority of elected leadership in Iowa, which brings the issue into the spotlight. Thanks in part to state funding, programs like Iowa Jobs for America's Graduates (iJAG) are offering career development programming in schools across the state. The growing investment in iJAG's work through increased state appropriations underscores the importance and impact of work-based learning (WBL) and demonstrates what further public investment could do to support similar programs.



Central Iowa Job Developers Network Lunch, May 2025

Effective Programming and Partnerships at Higher Education Institutions

Central Iowa benefits from the strength and commitment of its higher education institutions, which play a critical role in preparing both student and adult learners for success in today's evolving workforce. With a wide range of two-year, four-year, and certificate programs, these institutions provide employers across industries with a steady pipeline of skilled talent. Community colleges are driving innovation by offering flexible upskilling opportunities and partnering with both local high schools and businesses on workforce readiness programs.

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

While Central Iowa's workforce ecosystem offers many strengths, stakeholders identified several opportunities for growth and improvement.

Language and Cultural Accessibility

As Central Iowa's population becomes increasingly diverse, the system must adapt to meet evolving needs. More multilingual resources and culturally responsive programs are needed to ensure equitable access to opportunities.

Resource Constraints Amid Growing Needs

Schools, nonprofits, and service providers face limited funding and capacity, even as demand for services increases. Stakeholders uplifted the need for more public and private support, both in policy and funding, in addition to calling for creative solutions and partnerships to address growing needs.

Expanding Career Pathways for Adults

While youth-focused programs are growing, adults seeking to upskill, reskill, or re-enter the workforce face various hurdles and struggle to connect with sufficient support. This is especially true for those who are involved with the justice system or returning from career breaks.

Difficulties Finding Sustainable Employment Opportunities

Local job developers reported that job seekers are struggling to find gainful, sustained employment due to a combination of factors, including: a mismatch between job requirements and candidate skills; limited availability of opportunities; jobs offering wages that don't align with job seekers' needs and expectations; and increased competition for roles amid an evolving environment. Employers also reported challenges in hiring talent and filling roles at various skill levels despite active recruitment efforts.

Foundational Skills Gap

Many employers report gaps in emerging talent's foundational skills such as communication, teamwork, timeliness, and resilience. A lack of proficiency in these skills impacts an employee's ability to be successful in the workplace. Stakeholders across sectors voiced concern over unclear roles – whether schools, parents, or businesses should be responsible for developing these competencies in emerging talent – and the importance of addressing this gap to ensure both employees and employers are set up for long-term success.



Map Workshop, September 2024

Improving Coordination Among Schools, Government, and Business

Stakeholders identified a level of misalignment among key players in workforce development, which can cause delays and prevent opportunities for both public and private sector partners. Examples of misalignments identified include:

- **Lack of Mutual Understanding:** Businesses often struggle to understand school requirements and processes, and vice versa.
- **Lack of Intermediaries:** The limited presence of intermediaries to coordinate connections among schools, government, and businesses can hinder alignment and make it more difficult to connect individuals with appropriate opportunities. It may also contribute to confusion when navigating local and state workforce systems.

- **Communication Gaps:** High turnover in schools and businesses makes it hard to make contact, identify opportunities, and maintain relationships and continuity in communication.
- **Policy Barriers:** Government definitions of and/or requirements for work-based learning can affect schools' ability to get credit for impactful career exploration programs, which can inadvertently lead to limitations in innovation and business-school partnerships.

Addressing Barriers Beyond Employment

Employment is just one component of economic stability. Stakeholders highlighted that many workers struggle with barriers such as affordable housing, childcare, transportation, language and cultural competency, and food access. Integrated workforce strategies must also address these foundational needs.

Need for Shared Vision and Better Data

Without a clear, shared understanding of where we are today in terms of our workforce development supports in the public and private sectors, it's more difficult to define a shared vision for the next 10 to 20 years that will meet the needs of our region. The workforce development ecosystem map was created to help fill that gap, serving as a starting point for more informed and strategic conversations.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Central Iowa is at a pivotal moment. The insights gathered throughout this process underscore both the region's considerable assets and opportunities for growth ahead. Our region's ability to build a more inclusive, responsive, and effective workforce development system will depend on:

- Supporting lifelong learning and career mobility for all ages.
- Investing in cross-sector partnerships that break down silos and encourage innovation.
- Centering equity and accessibility so all Central Iowans have sustainable pathways to success.
- Leveraging tools like the Workforce Ecosystem Map to align goals and track progress.

Let us use the insights shared by our community to create a workforce development ecosystem that works better for everyone in Central Iowa.

Success of the Map

The Central Iowa Workforce Development Ecosystem Map is one of the many positive outcomes of these collaborative conversations. Since its launch in March 2025, the map has gained national attention, earned accolades, and become a trusted resource for workforce development professionals in Central Iowa: clear evidence of its value and reach.

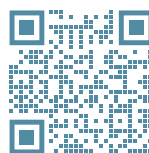
The tool has attracted more than 2,000 website views and nearly 240 map downloads (at the time of this writing) and became the most-downloaded PDF on the Greater Des Moines Partnership's website in the first month it was available to the public. It also garnered local media coverage from outlets such as the *Des Moines Business Record* and WOI ABC5, and was nationally spotlighted as the top featured story in the National Association of Workforce Boards' weekly newsletter, reaching workforce development professionals across the country.

Engagement has extended beyond the digital realm with Capital Crossroads hosting an informational convening for the Central Iowa Job Developers Network and providing a dedicated map training to more than 60 IowaWORKS workforce development professionals.



Kaity Patched accepting The Jacobson Institute Excellence In Innovation Award, May 2025

The impact of these achievements was reinforced in May 2025 when Capital Crossroads received the inaugural Excellence in Innovation Award from the Jacobson Institute at Grand View University for our collaborative work on this project.



To explore the Central Iowa Workforce Ecosystem Map and join the conversation, visit:
DSMpartnership.com/workforcemap