Arizona Regional Talent (ART) Networks

A Plan of Action Commissioned by the Arizona Mayors Education Roundtable

February 2022

This concept paper describes the Arizona Regional Talent (ART) Networks, a proposed effort to develop regionally specific initiatives to increase postsecondary enrollment and attainment—and meet workforce needs—in communities across Arizona.

Purpose

Arizona requires an educated workforce to drive its vibrant and increasingly competitive economy. The future of the state rests in the ability to ensure Arizona residents have access to equitable education opportunities and employment systems. To meet the goal of achieving 60 percent postsecondary attainment statewide by 2030, a coordinated state and regional approach to education and workforce development is required.

The statewide Achieve60AZ goal, which has garnered broad cross-sector and community support, is accompanied by four pillars and ten strategies for increasing postsecondary attainment rates:

1. Strengthening the Pipeline

2. Increasing Access and Success

3. Aligning Workforce Needs

4. Utilizing Metrics and Data

As proposed, the Arizona Regional Talent (ART) Networks is a coordinated response, commissioned by the Arizona Mayors Education Roundtable, to help regions develop and execute a plan that brings together K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and community partners to develop the opportunities Arizona residents need to gain the credentials, skills, and competencies required for good jobs that provide a living wage.

Challenges

As many as 7 in 10 Arizona jobs require a postsecondary credential. At the same time, Arizona has one of the lowest college enrollment rates in the country (53 percent), as well as one of the lowest college attainment rates. As reported by Education Forward Arizona, only 46 percent of working-age Arizonans hold a postsecondary credential.

Additionally, there are large attainment gaps in Arizona, gaps that will grow increasingly consequential as the demographics in the state continue to shift. White residents earn postsecondary credentials at double the rate of Hispanic residents (55 percent compared to 28 percent), all while Arizona has seen Hispanic population growth across six counties (Maricopa, Pima, Mohave, Yuma, Coconino, and Santa Cruz). Unless an intentional plan is implemented, these and other disparities with respect to postsecondary access and attainment will become more pronounced.

Strengths

Beyond the strong example set by Achieve60AZ, Arizona boasts other successful initiatives that provide a solid foundation for additional efforts to increase attainment rates. The Arizona Education Progress Meter—adopted by 50 cities and towns statewide—provides county, municipal, district, and school level data for a comprehensive picture of educational achievement in Arizona. Ask Benji, an innovative chatbot, in concert with a statewide coalition, helps students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and qualify for financial aid. The Arizona Promise Program helps first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students at Arizona's three universities to cover the full cost of college tuition and fees. Additionally, regional, county, and community economic development organizations have been working for decades to strengthen the state's economy.

Response and Goals

Arizona needs a state and regional plan that is based on proven, equity-focused strategies that contribute to a college-going culture in communities throughout the state. These strategies must define concrete ways to help more residents prepare for, enroll in, and complete postsecondary programs that award credentials and enable residents to get good jobs that pay a living wage.

Accordingly, Arizona Regional Talent (ART) Networks is a proposed plan to improve postsecondary enrollment and completion in ways that prioritize educational equity and that are aligned to Arizona's workforce needs. With these desired outcomes in mind, the practical goals of the plan include:

- Identify existing models and examples in the state that have achieved equitable outcomes when it comes to increasing postsecondary attainment.

- Recognize the importance of a leadership coalition that includes government (mayors) and postsecondary leaders (community college presidents).

- Establish state level technical assistance capacity to support regional strategies.

- Develop an ART Networks playbook, based on proven regional and state strategies that are driving enrollment and attainment growth, with a focus on college affordability and wrap-around student support for entry into a good job.

- Secure investments to support the state technical assistance and to help launch regional ART initiatives that can serve as proof points for expansion of ART efforts to more communities in Arizona.

- Develop ART initiatives, following the ART Networks playbook, to equitably increase college enrollment and completion in ways that are aligned to regional workforce needs.

- Influence conversations about developing state policies that accelerate the work demonstrated by the efficacy of regional initiatives.

Planning Overview

The Arizona Mayors Education Roundtable—a project of WestEd, with funding from Helios Education Foundation and the Arizona Community Foundation—partnered with Education Forward Arizona over a nine-month period to discuss the Arizona Talent Challenge. WestEd researched state and regional talent development strategies to surface models that produced meaningful and equitable results at scale.

Frameworks and models from across the country were reviewed, and special attention was given to high-impact results in Tennessee and Texas. The Dallas County Regional Talent strategy was presented to Roundtable members as an exemplar that produced measurable results and aligned to Arizona's needs.

Given mayoral and funder interest, WestEd contracted with Economic Mobility Systems to bring in operational leaders—with expertise in federal, state, and regional talent development—to help lead a planning process. These leaders engaged with an Arizona design team to create a framework that defined:

- A set of research-based talent equity non-negotiables

- An approach to state technical assistance

- An Arizona Regional Talent (ART) Networks playbook and implementation partner

- Next steps for ART Networks

Each of these framework elements is discussed in the following sections.

Talent Equity Non-Negotiables

The talent equity non-negotiables are based on a review of strategies, deployed in communities across the country, that produce equitable outcomes at scale with a focus on increasing financial aid completion, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary completion aligned to workforce needs. The following bullets are a summary of a national scan:

- **Leadership (Aligned Community Coalition):** In all successful models there is a cross-functional coalition of leaders. Most often there are regional leaders, like mayors, working with community college presidents to convene superintendents, nonprofits, community, and business leaders to look at data, disseminate bold messaging, and invest in a small team of dedicated people working daily—with a plan and support—to increase postsecondary access, enrollment, and attainment.

- **Inclusive Design (All Means All):** Increasing college enrollment at scale requires inclusive strategies. For example, the Tennessee Promise and Dallas County Promise have no grade point average (GPA) or income requirement. As a result, these programs can be marketed widely across the community and its high schools. Creating barriers, like a GPA requirement for open enrollment institutions (such as community colleges), will limit the impact of programs and initiatives that are intended to be more expansive. Both Tennessee and Dallas have embraced the term "college" to be inclusive of all postsecondary pathways that lead to living wage employment.

- **Affordability/Sustainability (Simple College Affordability Message and Financial Sustainability Plan):** The primary barrier to postsecondary entry and completion is affordability, both in terms of student/family perceptions and reality. Both Tennessee and Dallas keep the message simple—"free college tuition"/"tuition covered" for all—and require students to complete financial aid applications to ensure that federal funds flow into communities to support the strategy. Additionally, communities and states need to build financial sustainability plans to support the postsecondary affordability message, support staff, and provide wrap-around support.

- **Wrap-Around Support (Costs of College and Success Coaching):** Equitably increasing postsecondary enrollment requires the provision of additional wrap-around supports, especially for first-generation student populations and others who have been underrepresented, historically, in the postsecondary sector. Successful talent strategies ensure that either the colleges or external groups provide intentional success coaching, as well as a focus on basic student needs like food, housing, transportation, and mental health services. Successful strategies intentionally differentiate the ways students are

connected to and supported by the services they need. Because of the pandemic, more vulnerable student populations will require more wrap-around support while in high school (e.g., navigating college access processes).

- **Workforce Alignment (Employer Engagement and Pathway Campaigns):** While initial talent strategies might focus on college access, states and regions that produce results have outlined priority workforce pathways as part of the plan. Tennessee Reconnect and Dallas College Works organize postsecondary programs with state and regional workforce pathways, leveraging the data and websites in targeted marketing campaigns designed to grow with employer engagement. Many Arizona regions have workforce-aligned pathway strategies; the next step for the state is to determine how to bring regional innovations together into a more coherent statewide plan and approach.

- **Talent Infrastructure (User Centered Design and Equity Platforms):** Equitable talent strategies cannot produce equitable outcomes without a commitment to user-centered design and new equity technology platforms. Digital credentials that students own and manage—along with case management tools for counselors, advisors, and success coaches—are essential. Again, it will be important to determine how this plan can help enable the development of more coherence within and across regions by leveraging common infrastructure.

State Technical Assistance

The design team seeks to develop a coherent state-level plan to implement the aforementioned non-negotiable regional talent strategies, with the goal of building initiatives that serve as proof points to influence state policymaking and investment in the talent strategies that work for Arizona. In Tennessee and Texas, beneficial state policy—and significant state funding—were enabled thanks to examples of success from Knoxville, Tennessee and Dallas, Texas. The power of demonstrating impact is illustrated by state support for the Tennessee Promise and House Bill 3 in Texas, which earmarked $1.5 billion in new outcome bonus funding for Texas students who met college-readiness standards and enrolled in a Texas institution of higher education, or who earned a workforce-aligned certificate.

In both cases, significant philanthropic investment drove regional successes that provided policy leaders the evidence they needed to design and pass legislation that dramatically increased public funding for proven strategies.

- **Focus**: Given the importance of developing the policy agenda, the state technical assistance role will be to: (1) develop the talent policy agenda, (2) coordinate funding to regions to ensure non-negotiable talent strategy alignment, (3) find an implementation partner to support regions, and (4)

provide leadership regarding communication and data analysis that elevate and activate results.

- **Investment**: A three-year investment is needed to execute on the focus areas via the functions described in the following bullet point. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act encourages state leaders to invest in evidence-based programs and practices; ARPA funds could be used to develop Arizona-specific and regionally specific initiatives.

- **Functions**: To enable more regional and state coherence in talent strategies, the following functions should be considered:

  - Technology and Data Infrastructure: Developing a way for the state and regions to see and manage real-time data that informs policy and practice.

  - Analytics: Analyzing real-time and historical data to build a continuous intelligence model that informs policy and practice.

  - Communications: Helping to convene and share effective practices, establishing communities of practice, and producing reports that inform policy and practice.

  - Policy: Translating outcomes and effective practices into policy, and providing the resources required.

  - Competitive Funding: Managing competitive regional grants that incentivize regional leadership to build and execute strategies aligned with the research, effective practice, and community needs.

Arizona Regional Talent (ART) Network Playbook and Implementation Partner

In partnership with a state technical assistance function, an implementation group is required to help regions operationalize strategies and tools, with the technical support to produce new, valued, and equitable postsecondary outcomes aligned to regional workforce needs. The talent playbook will help regions leverage existing revenue streams to build plans for ongoing financial sustainability. The regional technical assistance model has five components:

- **Leadership**: Develop a community coalition to advance regional talent equity goals that include career exploration, college readiness, financial aid completion, college enrollment, college completion, and workforce entry into good jobs that pay a living wage.

- **Sustainability**: Develop a community funding and sustainability plan to ensure last dollar scholarships for college affordability, personnel to oversee and run regional efforts, and ongoing technology development and support.

- **Student Journey**: Map the student journey from 8th grade through workforce entry and build the communications plan and the data mapping capacity to ensure all students are on track to earn credentials and secure good jobs.

- **Data/IT Systems**: Confirm regional data sharing agreements are in place and launch user-centered design sessions to ensure strong implementation of digital credentials, communication tools, case management, and progress monitoring dashboards.

- **Partner Outreach**: Help communities convene K-12, postsecondary, community, and workforce partners to review and use real-time data to facilitate continuous improvement efforts.

As potential investment, the state technical assistance partner could frame regional competitive grants that encourage and support courageous regional leadership focused on the frameworks outlined in this proposal. Once regions are identified, a regional proposal should be developed in partnership with the state technical assistance partner and a regional implementation support partner. Models exist in other states, like Texas, that provide a roadmap that could be followed.

Next Steps For Arizona Regional Talent (ART) Networks

The Arizona Talent Design Team is focused on building a state framework and plan that includes helping to develop regional initiatives that serve as proof points for strategies that dramatically increase postsecondary enrollment and completion with equity aligned to regional workforce needs. These regional initiatives will be implemented with fidelity and aligned to strategies that have worked in other communities across the country. They will also support a bold policy agenda aimed at ensuring that public dollars follow philanthropic investments.

The following is a suggested timeline for initiating regional talent networks.

- **March 2022**: Convene First Mover Arizona Mayors and Community College Presidents

- **April 2022**: Secure initial funding for summer 2022 planning to support state technical assistance and an implementation partner

- **May 2022**: Planning workshop with interested regions to develop and submit plans for funding

- **June 2022**: Announce funding for regions and convene regional leaders

- **July 2022**: State technical assistance group and implementation partner host kick-off for regions

Potential State Technical Assistance Group: Education Forward Arizona

Frustrated with the pace of change and often fractured and inadequate responses to education improvement challenges, community leaders came together for 15 months—during the pandemic—to outline the strategic direction of a more robust education advocacy organization. That community planning process was supported by Arizona Community Foundation, Helios Education Foundation, and Pharos Foundation. During that period, three entities—Achieve60AZ, College Success Arizona and Expect More Arizona—came together to outline how to bring the best parts of each of their organizations together in ways that could lead to greater impact and efficiency. Putting their own brands aside, they created a new, more robust organization. By pooling their resources, and combining teams, funders and Boards, Education Forward Arizona emerged to address collective community aspirations to:

- Make a coherent and compelling case for education and how it benefits all Arizonans

- Align knowledge and interests to create more effective approaches and increase accountability

- Build public and political will for dramatic education improvement

Potential Talent Implementation Partner: Economic Mobility Systems

A talent strategy and implementation partner, Economic Mobility Systems (EMS) focuses on helping regions, institutions, and states leverage powerful new technology platforms focused on digital credentials and case management to drive new and more equitable talent results. EMS grew out of a 2017 JPM Chase Investment in the Dallas County Promise and, supported by other national and state foundational investment, has subsequently helped Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Fort Worth, and many smaller market Texas regions design, build, and run talent initiatives that are producing measurable results in terms of financial aid completion, college enrollment and retention, and workforce alignment.

EMS is currently helping regions build financially sustainable talent plans that more powerfully leverage access to substantial public funding streams such as federal

financial aid (Pell grants) and House Bill 3 College and Career Readiness outcomes bonus dollars. Both streams are essential components in helping students and systems with the critical funding needed to improve postsecondary attainment and living wage salaries of at least $50,000. EMS received a $3.1 million investment in June 2021, from the Greater Texas Foundation, to help three regions (Sherman, Denton, and Tyler) stand up and run regional talent ecosystems (similar to the Dallas Promise effort) that (1) empower students to own and use their college and career data for more equitable access to scholarships, postsecondary programs, internships, and jobs; and (2) empower communities with case management tools to more easily see and support students on their K-12-to-work journeys with real-time, actionable data.