

# WORKFORCE & EDUCATION AGENDA



## **New Dem Workforce & Education Working Group**

### **I. Introduction**

While Congressional Republicans promote policies that undermine public schools, restrict access to higher education, and weaken workforce development programs, Americans are being left without the skills and support necessary to compete in a rapidly evolving economy. The New Democrat Coalition offers a clear alternative: real investments in public schools, expanded training and credentialing pathways, and robust support for lifelong learning that creates good jobs at all skill levels. Congress must act to reject the Republicans' dismantling of our education infrastructure, strengthen our public schools, amplify vocational career opportunities, and ensure that every American has access to the quality training and support they need to succeed in the evolving labor market.

New Dems are committed to creating policies that ensure American students and workers can access high-quality training, upskilling, and good jobs throughout their careers so they can keep pace with emerging technologies and new opportunities in today's rapidly shifting economy without accumulating mountains of debt. By 2031, more than 70% of jobs will need some form of postsecondary training — placing steep demands on our education providers from kindergarten through graduate school. To ensure the American Dream remains open to all, federal policymakers must ensure that a strong public education system works hand in glove with robust workforce preparation strategies that creates an abundance of new, high-quality, well-paying jobs at all skill levels, including more union jobs and those that don't require a four-year degree.

While the current administration and Congressional Republicans pursue a misguided approach to education and workforce programs that is actively dismantling support for our public schools, making post-secondary education less accessible, and undermining the workforce development system, the New Democrat Coalition is offering real solutions to these major challenges.

We believe that through targeted investment and scaling what works, we can protect and improve our public schools, strengthen our training and credentialing infrastructure, and better align our education and workforce systems. The New Dem Workforce & Education Framework presents a vision of lifelong learning that supports Americans from their first day of school to their last day on the job.

## II. New Dem Principles for Workforce & Education Reform

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- 1. American students deserve world-class public education from early childhood onward that is accessible, affordable, and designed to make every American college and career ready:**
  - a. Protect investment in public schools so every child in every zip code, including those in rural areas and at Tribal schools, has access to the high-quality education they need to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.
  - b. Accelerate academic recovery in math and reading to improve student achievement.
  - c. Lower the student costs of higher education to put a degree, skills certification, or apprenticeship in reach for low-income and middle-class families, while ensuring apprenticeships, colleges and universities provide quality outcomes for all their students.
  - d. Expand earn while you learn opportunities.
  - e. Expand the use of registered apprenticeship programs both inside and outside the building and construction trades in the fifty percent of jobs that need more than a high school diploma and less than a college degree.
  - f. Provide incentives to colleges and universities to offer stackable skill certifications and support registered apprenticeships to better meet workforce needs.
  - g. Remove the stigma and class distinctions tied to apprenticeships, including through promoting labor and employer programs that introduce youth to valuable apprenticeship models.
- 2. Our education system should be as innovative and future-ready as the technological transformations shaping our economy:**
  - a. Ensure the responsible use of emerging technologies like AI by protecting everyone's safety and personal data and preventing unethical use by students or educators in schoolwork or instruction, all while upholding academic integrity and rigor.
  - b. Integrate AI into U.S. education so American workers are at the forefront of developing and deploying these technologies, as well as prepared to create and fill the new jobs they will generate.
  - c. Deploy these technologies in ways that advance equity and fairness in public education and prevent them from widening rather than helping close the digital divide and other inequities in our schools.
  - d. Utilize these technologies to create classroom environments where students think critically, engage in real-life hands-on learning that builds the skills needed for careers, civic participation, and life, and where educators are empowered to make informed educational decisions.
  - e. Encourage certified professionals to decide when, whether, and how to incorporate technology in pursuit of their larger educational priorities, with technologies and vendors serving, not driving, those decisions.
  - f. Ensure AI tools in classrooms support, not replace, educators by involving teachers, parents and guardians, and researchers in AI integration design and deployment. Equip teachers to harness potential benefits of AI for their craft, such as tailoring instruction, reducing paperwork, and increasing administrative efficiency.
  - g. Communicate school AI policies with commonsense guardrails clearly to parents, guardians, and families so they can make informed decisions and understand how these tools may be used in

classrooms for their students' success, including AI literacy, ethical reasoning, and creative problem solving.

**3. Our training and credentialing infrastructure should be as robust and responsive as the public university system:**

- a. Make earn-and-learn models, such as registered apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships implemented by unions and joint labor-management partnerships, viable options for those in high school and beyond.
- b. Involve industry and labor unions in the design, development, and implementation of programs, and expand the apprenticeship model.
- c. Invest in scaling proven programs that have strong outcomes, quality jobs, and meet the workforce needs of businesses while building pipelines to address future workforce needs.
- d. Reduce barriers to starting and finishing workforce training programs by providing access to key supports and benefits, like childcare and transportation, to recruit and support people from non-traditional backgrounds.
- e. Expand virtual options for rural, frontier, and Tribal students to expand training options and diverse curriculum options.
- f. Utilize the apprenticeship model where students can earn while they learn.

**4. Educational systems and workforce development efforts should complement—not oppose—one another. We should provide incentives for outcomes and stackable certifications that lead to clear, job-ready skills employers actually need.**

- a. Support coordination between employers, labor, educational institutions, and training providers so that workers gain in-demand skills for family wage jobs.
- b. Make learning a lifelong endeavor by providing accessible reskilling and upskilling opportunities throughout workers' careers.
- c. Invest in making credentials portable and stackable so that workers can continue to build on their skills over time and achieve long-term success.
- d. Support higher education as a public good that benefits all Americans, including through lifesaving research and innovation.

### **III. Goals**

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**1. World-class public education, as measured by:**

- a. Higher K-12 academic achievement;
- b. Expanded career opportunities (e.g., post-secondary education and military);
- c. Improved college completion rates by supporting higher education students with professional workforce and wraparound services and by allowing higher educational institutions to count certifications in completion data;
- d. Lower student loan debt while maintaining high-quality higher education, including by providing apprenticeship model opportunities that allow students to earn while they learn.

**2. Destigmatizing non-degree pathways, as measured by:**

- a. Stronger return on investment from credential and training programs;
- b. Larger number of registered apprentices per year in proven, high-quality programs both inside and outside the building and construction trades;
- c. Higher wages, benefits, and labor force participation rates.

3. **Robust worker supports**, as measured by:

- a. Improved workforce program completion rates with a focus on job quality;
- b. Increased employer and labor engagement in skills training;
- c. Fewer long-term workers who have been laid off or are about to be laid off;
- d. High re-employment rate for displaced workers who go through job re-training programs with realistic job training and pathways for jobs that are available in the region.

## IV. Policies

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### I: Improve the public education system to better serve American families from kindergarten through college.

- a. **Sustain strong federal support for public elementary and secondary schools.**
  - i. Integrate AI training, with clear guidance, into education and training to ensure American students learn the skills to succeed and safely navigate in a world increasingly shaped by AI. This must be done in coordination with teachers and localities to ensure that the programs are appropriately integrated.
  - ii. Protect critical federal funding for public education, including for Title I funding for schools and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to safeguard resources for our most vulnerable students. And ensure that the federal government pays its fair share to support students.
  - iii. Support our nation's hard-working educators through investment in teacher workforce development programs that strengthen recruitment, preparation, and retention of effective classroom teachers. Utilize the apprenticeship model for training new teachers to develop a trained workforce with real life and classroom experience without massive debt.
  - iv. Incentivize high-dosage tutoring, instruction grounded in the Science of Reading, and other evidence-based practices to enhance academic recovery and improve student achievement in reading and math.
  - v. Scale rigorous, evidence-backed Career and Technical Education (CTE) models, such as high-quality technical high schools, career academies in public high schools, pre-apprenticeships, and registered apprenticeship programs, with priority given to programs operated by unions and joint labor-management partnerships, so students can explore multiple pathways to good jobs.
  - vi. Work with students, parents, and guidance counselors to expose young Americans to opportunities in the building and construction trades to destigmatize that very lucrative job pathway.
  - vii. Expand Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs to rural areas and Tribal schools so that every student, irrespective of zip code, can access high-quality CTE opportunities.
  - viii. Ensure federal dollars are made available to support domestically sourced capital investment in maintenance and technological upgrades to school buildings that satisfy safety, security, and critical infrastructure needs.
- b. **Make post-secondary education, whether at a university, college, or community college, more affordable and get more students across the finish line to a degree, apprenticeship completion, or certification.**
  - i. Restore the purchasing power of the federal Pell Grant by increasing awards and indexing to inflation to help low-income families pay for college and reduce student debt.

- ii. Promote universal affordable access and options for public two-year and four-year colleges for low-income and middle-income students.
- iii. Expand partnerships with businesses and labor organizations to provide earn while you learn apprenticeship opportunities both inside and outside the building and construction trades.
- iv. Ensure students and families have the information they need to make the best decisions about which postsecondary program to attend through passage of the College Transparency Act (CTA), which would create a secure, public postsecondary student data system on student enrollment and outcomes.
- v. Scale effective reforms to boost college retention and graduation rates by expanding the Postsecondary Student Success Grant program (PSSG), which funds student-success initiatives that help more learners stay in school and earn credentials. Allow colleges and universities to include apprenticeship completion and certifications in graduation rate data.
- vi. Ensure sustained access to affordable student loan repayment plan options tied to a borrower's income.
- vii. Increase access to high quality graduate programs by aligning annual federal student loan limits with the postsecondary program's ability to provide positive outcomes for its graduates.

## II: Grow non-college pathways to good jobs.

- a. **Expand the integration of earn and learn models and apprenticeship programs within post-secondary education and better integrate them into our workforce training infrastructure.**
  - i. Expand the use of registered apprenticeships across key sectors of the economy by making registered apprenticeship programs easier to start and scale for employers while ensuring quality, rigor, as well as strong and enforceable labor standards and worker protections.
  - ii. Better integrate pathways to registered apprenticeships into high school curriculum through vehicles like pre-apprenticeships and career and technical education programs, while maintaining strong and enforceable guardrails to prohibit youth on high-risk jobsites.
  - iii. Invest in growing and replicating innovative, proven workforce models and pilot programs on a larger scale, focusing on bringing those models to rural and Tribal schools.
  - iv. Ensure sustained funding to scale high-quality registered apprenticeships and other union-led training programs.
- b. **Ensure credentialing programs are leading to in-demand careers in high-quality, good-paying jobs.**
  - i. Coordinate among employers, workers, labor unions, joint labor-management partnerships, training providers, and educational institutions to define what it means to receive high-quality credentials that lead to a strong return on investment – and focus resources on those pathways.
  - ii. Reauthorize and fully-fund the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), through provisions that ensure full and equal labor participation in governing structures including state and local workforce boards and industry-sector partnerships as well as Rapid Response programs, expanded labor consultation and concurrence requirements, strong and enforceable labor standards and worker protections including child labor protections, robust performance standards that ensure quality training leads to family sustaining employment.
  - iii. Raise the bar on performance outcomes from training and credential providers, make it easier for workers to find high-quality opportunities, incentivize providers to expand into rural areas, and maintain strong guardrails to prevent low-quality or predatory programs.

- i. Support and foster local efforts between employers, labor unions, joint labor-management partnerships, and educational institutions to provide credentials that directly correspond to in-demand positions.

### **III: Support workers from their first job to their last.**

- a. Provide workers with the wraparound support they need to afford training programs and continue to develop critical skills.**
  - i. Ensure workers have the support they need to start and finish training programs by providing income support, making childcare and other early learning programs more affordable and accessible, increasing workers' access to paid leave, and investing in reliable transportation options.
  - ii. Better integrate public benefits offerings with workforce training options for displaced workers to streamline service delivery.
  - iii. Eliminate benefits cliffs, such as by disregarding income from “earn and learn” training programs for purposes of public assistance eligibility.
  - iv. Make everyday costs like health care, groceries, and housing more affordable for Americans by ensuring that wages keep up with costs.
  - v. Increase the federal minimum wage and tie it to the cost of living.
- b. Focus on building a resilient workforce development system that prepares workers for a changing job market.**
  - i. Create incentives for businesses to upskill their current employees and make sure workers benefit from those incentives (i.e. increase employee pay and benefits), while also bolstering reskilling programs for displaced workers that lead to quality, family sustaining jobs.
  - ii. Make lifelong learning a priority by providing workers with opportunities to develop the skills they need to thrive in the face of an evolving economy.
  - iii. Fully consult business and labor organizations in the design, development, and implementation of worker training programs, including the identification of growth areas and “in-demand” training programs that lead to quality jobs.
  - iv. Utilize AI in partnership with government, business, and labor organizations to both better understand the types of jobs and skills that will be in-demand in the future and prepare workers to use new technologies. Expand the role of Wagner-Peyser Employment Service staff, merit-hired state employees responsible for delivering job placement and related employment services, in these initiatives.
  - v. Deploy milestone-based funding to invest in new talent pipelines for new and developing industries with good jobs.
- c. Hold employers accountable for creating good jobs and supporting their workers**
  - i. Ensure companies benefiting from federal funding and tax incentives comply with all applicable federal laws including all federal labor laws administered by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), and the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) through representation of compliance requirements.
  - ii. Ensure companies benefiting from federal funding and tax incentives provide quality training, family-sustaining wages and benefits, safe working conditions, and maintain union neutrality.
  - iii. Strengthen federal labor enforcement to ensure businesses meet basic obligations around fair pay, workplace safety, and respect for workers' right to organize and collectively bargain.

## V. Next Steps

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Following the President's Executive Order 14242 on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025 to dismantle the Department of Education, the Administration has moved quickly to unwind and reassign the Department's core functions, undermining decades of progress for American students. Congressional Republicans continue to promote policies that strip students of resources, protections, and pathways needed to succeed in the 21st century. New Dems are leading the fight to safeguard and expand high-quality education and training for American students and workers of all backgrounds and abilities.

To move this agenda forward, New Dems will not only work to investigate and demand transparency on the Administration's plans to break apart the Department of Education, but will also continue to collaborate with educators, industry partners, and workforce organizations to support student and worker transitions to today's technological advancements.

New Dems remain committed to work across the aisle to build bipartisan reforms that strengthen America's public education, improve non-college pathways, and expand worker support. Congress must act to preserve and restore the Department of Education's core mission, and ensure every American learner and worker has access to the world-class education and training needed to succeed.