Strategy spotlight:

StriveTogether®

What's working across the Cradle to Career Network

Outcome: Postsecondary Completion

Essential Question: Do students attend postsecondary institutions that provide adequate financial aid and are adequately funded to offer a quality educational experience?

Indicator: Postsecondary enrollment directly after high school graduation, expenditures per student, cumulative student debt, unmet financial need

The Factors

In Michigan, postsecondary education is one of the strongest pathways to economic mobility, yet affordability and access remain major barriers. In Kent County, the challenge is clear. Postsecondary enrollment stood at 62.2% for the class of 2022, down slightly from 63.4% in 2020, while completion reached 56.8% in 2023 — the highest rate in more than a decade but still uneven across student groups. First-generation and students of color continue to face disproportionate challenges in persisting and earning credentials.

At the same time, Michigan's workforce needs are shifting. The state's labor-force participation rose from 60.4% to 61.9% between 2022 and 2023, and Kent County employment grew by 0.4% from 2022 to 2023 (342,000 to 344,000 employees). This growth reflects economic momentum but also highlights a gap: many young adults are working rather than returning to school to earn higher credentials. Expanding access to postsecondary education and training is essential to sustaining this momentum and ensuring long-term mobility.

Recognizing this, **KConnect**, the regional cradle-to-career partnership, identified postsecondary completion as a key lever for economic stability and community growth. By aligning data, partnerships and policy advocacy, KConnect has worked to close affordability gaps and connect education to workforce opportunity, helping more students finish the paths they start.

The Strategies

KConnect played an important role in the statewide coalition that advanced the Michigan Community College Guarantee to passage in 2024. The Guarantee provides up to two years of tuition-free community college for recent Michigan high school graduates, removing cost barriers and expanding access to postsecondary education statewide. Through direct policy change, KConnect influenced state legislation to make postsecondary education more accessible. Through indirect policy alignment, the partnership joined local and state stakeholders around shared goals for statewide credential attainment and workforce readiness. This dual approach ensures that the Guarantee contributes to Michigan's broader $70 billion economic mobility framework by linking education access to long-term career pathways and inclusive economic growth.

In January 2024, KConnect convened nearly 70 of its local partners at its first P.A.C.E. (Policy, Advocacy and Community Engagement) Convening to establish a Shared Policy Agenda for Kent County. Participants prioritized policies aimed at improving post-secondary enrollment, persistence and completion, setting the stage for collective advocacy. Just weeks later, Governor Gretchen Whitmer proposed expanding the Michigan Achievement Scholarship to provide up to two years of tuition-free community college for first-time, full-time students. Recognizing the alignment with its policy priorities, KConnect's Policy and Advocacy Workgroup acted quickly to endorse the proposal and mobilize support.

Through the spring and summer of 2024, KConnect led coordinated advocacy with state legislators and regional partners to ensure the Guarantee's inclusion in the FY2025 state budget. The policy team maintained close relationships with lawmakers in both parties, educating decision-makers on the proposal's modest cost and shared local data showing how affordability barriers disproportionately affected first-generation and students of color.

KConnect sustained its strategy momentum by aligning with partners across the education and workforce ecosystem — including the Michigan Community College Association, Michigan College Access Network and Grand Rapids Community College — to reinforce a unified message that tuition-free community college would strengthen Michigan's families and economy. The result was a major statewide win: a $23 billion education package that included the Community College Guarantee, offering in-district tuition coverage and a $1,000 Michigan Achievement Bonus for Pell-eligible students.

After the policy passage, KConnect shifted its focus to monitor implementation and accountability to ensure the Guarantee delivers on its promise of access and completion. The partnership continues to track enrollment and persistence data, share early findings and advocate for improvements such as increasing FAFSA completion and expanding flexibility for part-time learners, to help more students complete the paths they start.

The Impact

The Community College Guarantee is already showing measurable results. At Grand Rapids Community College, students are benefiting from the program in its first semester, saving over $1 million in tuition. Statewide, community colleges have seen notable enrollment gains since the policy launched. Of the 12,446 additional students enrolled across Michigan's higher education system in fall 2024, more than half attended two-year public institutions. The Guarantee is helping drive this growth by removing financial barriers for thousands of students and reaffirming the importance of state-level investments in expanding access to higher education.

In Kent County, where postsecondary completion rose to 56.8%, partners are pairing tuition coverage with wraparound supports like childcare, transportation and success coaching to help students stay on track. Early implementation data highlight both progress and opportunity: while uptake of the Guarantee has been strong, persistence remains tied to FAFSA reapplication and the full-time enrollment requirement, which can limit access for working students balancing family responsibilities.

KConnect and its partners are addressing these barriers through data-driven advocacy, connecting the Guarantee to local priorities such as boosting FAFSA completion and expanding support for adult learners. Beyond the numbers, the policy is shifting how Michigan invests in opportunity. Many policymakers, higher education leaders and advocates now view the Guarantee as a model for connecting education and workforce systems and embedding opportunity in statewide growth.

Through this work, KConnect has demonstrated how local leadership can shape state policy, inform implementation and drive lasting systems change, turning an affordability challenge into a catalyst for postsecondary success and economic mobility.