

What's working across the Cradle to Career Network

Outcome: Employment



Essential Question: Are there quality pathways for students who pursue career training that lead to employment in quality jobs?

Indicator: CTE pathway concentration, participation in work-based learning, access to in-demand CTE pathways, expenditures on workforce development programs and access to ongoing career skills development

The Factors

Employment is a critical pathway to economic stability across Eastern Kentucky's Appalachian region, yet persistent barriers continue to limit access to quality jobs. The 54 Appalachian counties served by the [Appalachian Cradle to Career Partnership \(APPC2C\)](#) face long-standing barriers tied to limited job availability, geographic isolation, transportation constraints and historically low access to postsecondary credentials aligned with local labor-market needs. These barriers disproportionately affect individuals from low-income households, nontraditional learners, young people at risk of disconnection and communities with high unemployment.

Serving as the backbone organization, APPC2C aligns K-12 systems, postsecondary institutions, community-based organizations and employers around a shared cradle-to-career vision that connects education and training to regional workforce demand. Through this role, the partnership works across systems to strengthen pathways from education to employment.

Employment outcomes one year after postsecondary completion have remained fairly flat across the

Appalachian region. In 2020–2021, 71.3% of completers were employed, compared with 70.1% in 2021–2022 and 69.6% in 2022–2023. Over the same period, postsecondary readiness, increased across the region from 75.5% in 2021–2022 to 86.9% in 2023–2024, as more students met academic or career benchmarks such as ACT scores, dual credit, industry-recognized credentials and work-based learning. These trends highlight the need for stronger alignment between education, workforce training and employer demand to ensure readiness leads to employment and long-term economic mobility.

The Strategies

APPC2C's employment strategy focuses on aligning education, workforce training and economic development to create clear pathways into employment. As the backbone organization, the partnership brings together schools, postsecondary institutions, employers and community partners to ensure education and training reflect regional workforce demand.

A core strategy is expanding access to paid, career-connected learning. APPC2C advances this work through the Appalachian Promise Learn and Earn Internship Program, which provides paid internships that build skills and connect students to regional workforce opportunities. In June 2024, 57 students completed the Learn and Earn Internship pre-survey for a 10-week paid summer program combining community-based internships with skill-building in workplace readiness, service and community storytelling.

PartnerCorps complements this approach by placing 66 members annually across Bell, Knox, Leslie and Perry counties, including 42 adults and 24 high school students in both 2024 and 2025. Program participants receive service-based experience, mentoring and a \$6,000 living allowance, along with a nearly \$2,000 education award to support postsecondary costs.

To ensure education leads to employment, APPC2C connects credentialed pathways aligned to high-demand careers. Through the Rural Postsecondary & Economic Development, the partnership supports 16 school districts across eight counties, reaching approximately 16,000 students annually through dual credit, internships and advising, including paid internships that blend skill development, community engagement and hands-on work experience.

Hazard Community and Technical College plays a key role in these efforts, enrolling 3,136 students in Fall 2024, including 1,289 high school students in dual credit, expanding early access to credentials connected to workforce demand.

To turn these pathways into jobs, APPC2C also works with economic development and leadership partners. Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation and Brushy Fork Leadership Institute strengthen businesses and leadership capacity, helping ensure education and training pathways connect to real job opportunities across the region.

The Impact

Strong employment pathways depend on coordinated investments across education, workforce and economic development systems. Expanded dual credit access, internships and targeted supports increased college and career readiness from 75.5% in 2021–2022 to 87.5% in 2024–2025, alongside a 5% increase in on-time graduation rates, strengthening transitions into postsecondary education and employment. Results from the Learn and Earn Summer 2024 pre-survey showed that 72% of participants reported that this was their first professional work experience, with more than 90% expressing confidence in core employability skills.

Regional economic development partners further reinforced these pathways by expanding access to jobs. As of 2026, Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation has invested \$701.6 million across southeastern Kentucky, supporting the creation and maintenance of 29,303 jobs and providing technical assistance to more than 1,150 individuals and organizations.

Place-based leadership and employer engagement strengthened employment pathways through Brushy Fork Leadership Institute's People Ready Communities initiative. Over the last two cycles (three years), the initiative served 10 communities and 188 individuals across the region, connecting participants with employers and postsecondary partners across high-demand sectors and expanding exposure to local job opportunities and career pathways.

Through its Workforce Training and Support strategy, APPC2C demonstrates how aligned systems can work together to strengthen employment outcomes. By aligning partners around shared goals and scaling effective approaches, the partnership is helping more Appalachian residents connect education to meaningful work and long-term economic mobility.

Strategies Creating Impact



Career Pathways Alignment > Aligns education and employers around high-demand careers



Paid Work-Based Learning > Provides paid, career-connected experiences, such as paid internships, that build skills and pathways



Targeted Workforce Supports > Delivers credentialed training and supports for individuals furthest from opportunity