Helping to build Indiana’s education and workforce pathways

The Education Workforce Innovation Network is an initiative of the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning in partnership with Lilly Endowment Inc. and the Indiana Education Roundtable. Dubbed “EWIN,” the network has provided assistance since 2012 to regional leaders in education and workforce alignment, including the Indiana Works Councils, as they develop strategies that will lead to action benefiting Indiana communities and students.

The initiative is designed to accomplish two goals for Indiana communities:

— to support the development, articulation, and publication of education and career pathways for students and parents.
— to support state employers by providing a more qualified workforce that is educated and trained for existing skilled jobs/careers.

The initial challenge at the state level was to develop shared terminology and understanding of education workforce pathways and sectors, and the network is helping to clarify these concepts for all involved. Once complete, these will be presented to the Indiana Career Council for potential adoption into its work. In addition to constructing common terminology, efforts to align education with career and workforce needs vary widely throughout Indiana.
Establishing commonality

“There’s no commonality across the state. Everyone is in a different place,” said CELL’s Todd Hurst, director of education and workforce innovation. “A variety of groups are participating in regional change across the state, which can include works councils, workforce investment boards, philanthropic funded organizations, postsecondary institutions, school districts, and business and industry.” According to David St. John, global training manager for Cook Medical, the network is valuable to education and workforce development in two important areas. “First, the leadership of EWIN Director Todd Hurst encourages statewide collaboration among the many partners to bring about robust solutions,” he said. “Second, the EWIN team understands the national best practices in innovative curriculum and educational programming that can be applied locally in Indiana. I can’t imagine trying to navigate through the complex issues of workforce development and education without the support of EWIN during the past 18 months as chair of the Region 8 [South Central Indiana] Works Council.”

Hurst was clear that EWIN’s purpose isn’t to “fix things.” “We’re coming in to help community members solve challenges themselves,” he says. “We provide a framework, facilitate discussions, and introduce them to processes that can help them work together to accomplish their own regional objectives.” Each region has different types of employment and educational opportunities, so plans need to be customized. This initial work also prepares regions to apply for grants toward technical assistance for the next step, to develop educational career/workforce pathways tailored to their specific areas. These pathways, grounded in real-world connections, will serve most students—those pursuing a traditional four-year degree profession, specialized work requiring a two-year degree, or certified employment with a local manufacturer. Such pathways partnerships are most effective within communities when businesses help make educational connections meaningful for students.

Process-based assistance

Approved grants will provide assistance for the needs of each region. Process-based assistance could mean training participants in coalition building or design thinking strategies to bring the right people to the table and to develop common goals, language, and desired outcomes. Process is critical to change and often overlooked in these kinds of conversations. Outcome-based assistance will be necessary as the process advances. It offers guides and facilitators to bring specialized expertise or resources to help regions carry out their plans. That might mean providing leadership when high schools, a higher education partner, and area businesses collaborate to design specialized curriculum/training for students to earn college credit to get a jumpstart on a career and/or four-year college degree.

Although initial work is regional, efforts will culminate in development of the Indiana Pathways Innovation Network. Its overall goals will be shared statewide, but each region’s approach to meeting them could remain different. EWIN has played an important role in building the foundation for this network. Marie Mackintosh, associate chief operating officer for workforce strategy at the Indiana Department of Workforce Development, summed up EWIN’s work this way. “The Department of Workforce Development is investing in new ideas, knowledge transfer, and infrastructure to build a foundation at the regional level supporting career pathways and sector strategies,” she says. “EWIN’s leadership and partnership with stakeholders, particularly at a local level, has been critical to the success of our implementation efforts.”