

STRENGTHENING POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Using postsecondary outcomes data effectively is a complex process that often benefits from various organizations and agencies working together to get good data successfully into the hands of local decision-makers. Not only does data need to be collected and accessible to a wide variety of education stakeholders, but users need to know that the data exists, be able to trust it, and understand how to read and analyze it accurately to implement relevant solutions to improve postsecondary pathways for students.

State agencies and community organizations each have strengths and roles to play in helping stakeholders access and use postsecondary outcomes data. Community organizations often are best positioned to translate data into compelling, locally relevant stories that resonate with students, families, educators, and community leaders. They understand local contexts and relationships, which helps ensure that data insights reach the decision-makers who can act on them most directly. State agencies, meanwhile, are well equipped to coordinate across government entities, navigate complex rules and regulations surrounding the data, and ensure compliance with legal and policy requirements. They also play a critical role in aligning data efforts with statewide priorities and providing policymakers with reliable, actionable information to support large-scale decision-making.

This case study demonstrates how the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) and Education Forward Arizona (EFA) have formed an ongoing partnership that reinforces each agency's role and responsibility in increasing statewide access to and use of postsecondary outcomes data to improve pathways for students.

Arizona Department of Education

The Postsecondary and Community Engagement team at ADE serves as a critical bridge between the state's K12 education system and its higher education, workforce, and community partners. The team works to strengthen pathways for students by connecting schools and districts with resources, data, and partnerships that support successful transitions from K12 education into postsecondary education and careers. In addition to providing technical assistance and statewide resources, the team invests significant time building relationships across agencies and organizations to align efforts and respond to stakeholder needs. The Postsecondary and Community Engagement team coordinates with higher education institutions, community-based organizations, and state agencies to improve communication, expand access to information, and support shared goals related to students' college and career readiness. Through this work, the team helps create a more connected and collaborative system that supports students throughout their educational journeys.

Education Forward Arizona

EFA is a statewide, nonpartisan nonprofit organization that advances education outcomes and postsecondary attainment through policy advocacy, cross-sector collaboration, and direct services. As a statewide intermediary, the organization brings together educators, employers, policymakers, and communities to strengthen Arizona's education-to-workforce pipeline by

- promoting policies and funding that help students attain education and workforce credentials;
- developing and delivering professional learning that builds K12 educator and institutional capacity to implement effective practices, improve student outcomes, and drive sustainable systems change; and
- managing and providing scholarships, advising, and holistic mentoring to help students navigate postsecondary pathways.

Through this work, EFA ensures that more Arizonans can access and complete education and training that lead to economic mobility and a stronger state economy.

A History of Partnership

The partnership between ADE and EFA began through an Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER)-funded initiative in which ADE provided a grant for EFA to maintain a chatbot that helps students and families complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This project evolved into a broader, ongoing collaboration built around the shared goals of improving college access and student success across Arizona. Through continued collaboration on multiple initiatives, ADE and EFA developed a strong working relationship grounded in trust, complementary expertise, and a shared commitment to serving students.

Building Blocks for Success

Find a Common Vision

ADE and EFA share a strong, unified vision of helping Arizona students succeed. Both agencies have statewide reach, which enables them to align efforts on what is best for students. For example, ADE supports and provides guidance for the FAFSA-embedded completion metrics being incorporated into College and Career Readiness Indicators (CCRI). ADE also provides technical assistance and professional learning to support FAFSA integration into economics and government coursework, as well as broader practices for counselors across the state. EFA complements this work by leading public awareness campaigns, advocating for policies, and providing professional learning opportunities that support FAFSA completion. Although their approaches differ, their partnership allows the organizations to work in tandem toward increasing FAFSA completion rates and expanding students' access to postsecondary opportunities.

The shared vision also allows EFA to advocate for policies and practices that strengthen, rather than conflict with, ADE's priorities. For example, ADE must prioritize the secure stewardship of student data, including compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), clear data ownership practices, and role-based access controls for K12 data users. EFA, meanwhile, often focuses on increasing accessibility, usability, and the timely use of data to drive statewide action and public awareness. Although these priorities reflect the organizations' different roles, they are ultimately aligned around the same goal of improving student outcomes. EFA can champion efforts such as helping more students complete the FAFSA, improving data-sharing practices, and advocating for postsecondary access and attainment in ways that compliment and reinforce ADE's broader strategy.

ADE and EFA also collaborate to train and support school counselors across Arizona. Through its College Access Professional (CAP) Training courses, EFA helps counselors and educators build the knowledge and skills needed to guide students through postsecondary and career exploration, as well as enrollment in and completion of education or training beyond high school. The asynchronous courses let practitioners earn certifications and graduate credits.

Recognizing the value of this work, EFA partnered with ADE to align CAP coursework with the state's counselor certification requirements, ensuring the training directly supports educators seeking counselor recertification through ADE or salary advancement within their districts. ADE's Postsecondary and Community Engagement team now facilitates some of these courses, while EFA continues refining the curriculum to align with ADE standards and priorities. Through this collaboration, ADE and EFA jointly shape systems and supports that strengthen college and career readiness statewide.

Define Partner Roles & Strengths

The Action Fund has supported both EFA and ADE as they implement projects that further the use of postsecondary outcomes data to improve pathways for students. As part of their award agreement, the agencies are intentionally collaborating to implement their respective projects.

ADE's project, called Arizona Pathways to Post-Secondary: Student Success Dashboard, will bring together data from grades 9-12, career and technical education (CTE), postsecondary, assessment, and workforce systems, creating a single, actionable dashboard interface for those working most closely with students. EFA will use funds to develop and deliver CAP Training courses that will build the capacity of Arizona school counselors, educators, administrators, and college access professionals, particularly those serving under-resourced communities, to use postsecondary outcomes data to inform college and career readiness programming and high-quality individualized postsecondary advising practices.

Both entities bring strengths to the project. ADE brings the authority, infrastructure, and technical capacity needed to securely collect, integrate, and manage statewide data, including hosting the dashboard within a secure state data system. EFA complements this role by leveraging its strong community relationships and communications expertise to increase awareness and use of the dashboard among local stakeholders. In addition to outreach, EFA helps community members and practitioners understand how to interpret and apply the data in meaningful ways. By recognizing and reinforcing their distinct but complementary responsibilities, ADE and EFA can create a more effective and sustainable approach to increasing access to and use of postsecondary outcomes data across Arizona.

Build Trust and Transparency

Trust between organizations creates the conditions for honest feedback, productive problem-solving, and long-term collaboration. Transparency further strengthens partnerships by helping organizations understand and respect each other's responsibilities, limitations, and decision-making processes. ADE and EFA have built trust and transparency throughout their longstanding relationship and reinforced it through clear roles around authority and accountability. For example, ADE is responsible for K12 data governance, FERPA compliance, and overall system integrity, while EFA respects those boundaries around data use and works within approved data-sharing structures and aggregated reporting processes. At the same time, EFA brings expertise in community engagement, communications, and advocacy that complements ADE's technical and governance responsibilities. By openly discussing roles, honoring organizational constraints, and maintaining transparency around how data and decisions are managed, the partnership has established a strong foundation of mutual trust that supports deeper collaboration, stronger alignment, and more effective action on behalf of Arizona students.

Look for Opportunities to Collaborate

Maintaining a successful partnership also requires consistent collaboration to keep the shared goals and vision in mind. ADE and EFA serve on education coalitions such as the FAFSA Coalition and the Postsecondary Attainment Coalition, and they co-design joint projects.

At the beginning of each year, ADE, EFA, and the Arizona Board of Regents jointly coordinate and deliver a statewide roadshow for middle and high school counselors, CTE coordinators, directors, and student services administrators. The roadshow brings together information about the resources, tools, and postsecondary outcomes data available across all three organizations, helping local practitioners better understand and use the data to support students. By presenting a coordinated message and shared set of resources, the partnership increases awareness, consistency, and statewide access to postsecondary data and related supports. The initiative also creates opportunities to build ongoing relationships and allows districts to request more targeted training and technical assistance based on their local needs. In addition, the collaboration helps the partner organizations stay informed about local needs and one another's work, align future efforts, and identify new opportunities for partnership and data use across the state.

Communicate Openly and Often

ADE and EFA emphasize that strong partnerships require intentional, ongoing communication from the very beginning. By consistently updating each other on projects, priorities, challenges, and emerging opportunities, the organizations have built a strong partnership grounded in trust and a shared commitment to providing accurate, timely, and accessible information, tools, and resources for school counselors, educators, and college access professionals across Arizona. This close coordination allows both organizations to align their project design, troubleshooting, messaging, and implementation efforts, creating a more cohesive and effective experience for practitioners statewide. Their partnership is reinforced through coordinated professional learning opportunities, including EFA's Lunch and Learn sessions and ADE's District Lead Counselor convenings, as well as aligned communication channels such as the AzCAN newsletter and ADE School Counselor newsletter. In addition, ADE-specific content, data, and best practices are intentionally integrated into EFA's CAP courses, ensuring a unified approach to postsecondary advising, college access support, and the use of postsecondary outcomes data across Arizona.

Conclusion

The partnership between ADE and EFA demonstrates how state agencies and community organizations can leverage their complementary strengths to increase access to and effective use of postsecondary outcomes data. Through a shared vision, clearly defined roles, ongoing communication, and mutual trust, the organizations have created a collaborative approach that helps educators, counselors, policymakers, and communities better support students on their postsecondary pathways. Their work highlights the importance of cross-sector partnerships in transforming data into actionable insights that improve student outcomes and strengthen statewide education-to-workforce systems.

About the K12 CoP

The K12 Community of Practice: Using Postsecondary Data (K12 CoP) is supported by Quality Information Partners (QIP). It is a freely-accessible, community-driven collective of state-level K12 postsecondary data users, collectors, managers, and analysts who collaborate to share challenges, potential solutions, best practices, and resources to improve pathways for students. Learn more at <https://k12usingpsdata.com/>,