

CTE and Career Readiness in Northwest Arkansas

INSIGHTFUL EDUCATION SOLUTIONS

JUNE 2026



NWA K-12 CTE Pathway Analysis



49 Active Pathways



16 School Districts

AN EXAMINATION OF K-12 CTE STUDENT ACTIVITY IN NORTHWEST ARKANSAS (2023-2025)

High-quality K-12 career and technical education (CTE) pathways aligned with regional economic needs can provide students with the knowledge, skills and credentials that lead to continued advancement and economic security.

In 2023, the Walton Family Foundation engaged Insightful Education Solutions to examine the quality and accessibility of CTE programs in Northwest Arkansas. This new analysis provides updated data and insights on the following two questions:

- **Does the CTE pathway activity align with regional economic priorities?**
- **Are NWA CTE students achieving metrics of pathway quality?**

KEY TAKEAWAYS *The analysis examined the current state of NWA CTE pathway alignment, access and quality*

ALIGNMENT

Student enrollment and priority sectors are misaligned, particularly in the highest-opportunity areas.

- Building & Construction and Transportation, Distribution & Logistics offer the strongest labor market opportunity – but Construction enrollment is critically low region-wide.
- Agriculture drives enrollment but is not a priority sector. Advanced Manufacturing and IT – explicit regional priorities – remain severely underdeveloped.
- Education & Training is the region’s largest priority-sector pathway but offers few sub-baccalaureate roles – most require a four-year degree.

ACCESS

District access to priority pathways is uneven – and small districts are disproportionately excluded.

- Building & Construction is inaccessible to students in all 10 small districts. Advanced Manufacturing concentrations exist in only 2 small districts (Huntsville and Gravette).
- The region’s smaller districts lack access to the region’s top-growth sectors. Huntsville’s Advanced Manufacturing exception shows what’s possible.

QUALITY

Quality metrics attainment is low across NWA CTE pathways. Some pathways serve as bright spots.

- Medical Skills & Services, Criminal Justice, Construction Technology and Pre-Engineering are multi-metric standouts.
- Agribusiness (3,443 concentrators), Culinary Arts (2,151) and Office Administration (1,103) show minimal quality metrics despite large enrollment. Scale creates urgency.
- Welding earns high early-postsecondary (EPS) credits but has zero credential attainment – an addressable gap given certification availability.

Data span 2023–2025 academic years except for postsecondary enrollment data (2022-2024); labor market data from Lightcast Q1 2026 (Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers MSA). Data sources: ADE Division of Career and Technical Education, AR Dept of Higher Ed.

TERMS & DEFINITIONS The analysis uses the following terminology throughout

Concentrator = a student with two or more credits in a CTE program area (meaningful engagement, not full completion).

Completer = a student who has finished three or more courses in a pathway (full completion). Figures below describe concentrators unless they say “completers.”

Quality metrics = an industry credential earned, early postsecondary (EPS) college credit earned, a work-based learning (WBL) course completed and postsecondary enrollment after graduation.

Regional (economic) priority sectors = Healthcare; Building & Construction; Advanced Manufacturing; Transportation, Distribution & Logistics; Business & Management; and Education & Training. Information Technology is treated as a cross-cutting sector spanning all six.

A POSITIVE DIRECTION

PATHWAY ALIGNMENT IS SHIFTING

While quality metrics are not directly comparable across analyses, the composition of student activity has meaningfully changed

2020-2022

ORIGINAL ANALYSIS

3 of 10

top completed pathways aligned with priority sectors.

- 5 of top 10 completed pathways in Agriculture
- Agriculture ≈ 69% of top 10 completions
- Healthcare, Manufacturing and Construction barely visible in top completions

2023-2025

UPDATED ANALYSIS

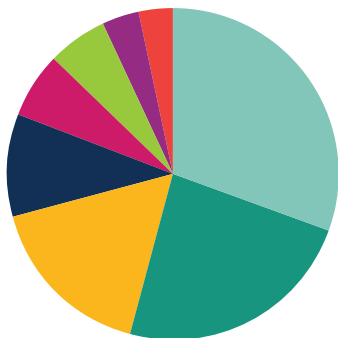
7 of 10

top completed pathways aligned with priority sectors.

- 2 of top 10 completed pathways in Agriculture
- Agriculture ≈ 38% of top 10 completions
- Medical Skills, Pre-Engineering, Construction and Sports Medicine all enter top 10

A CLOSER LOOK AT PATHWAY ALIGNMENT Student activity in NWA CTE pathways

Pathway Enrollment Distribution (2023-2025)



Agriculture: 25.4% of concentrators

Healthcare: 19.7% of concentrators

Education & Training: 13.8% of concentrators

Business & Management: 8.5% of concentrators

Advanced Manufacturing: 5.3% of concentrators

Information Technology: 4.7% of concentrators

Transportation & Logistics: 3.0% of concentrators

Building / Construction: 2.7% of concentrators



Building & Construction and Transportation, Distribution & Logistics offer the region's strongest labor-market opportunity but together hold only 5.7% of concentrators. Six of the top 10 CTE-accessible occupations by labor-market opportunity are in Construction.



Agriculture (25.4% of concentrators) is the single largest enrollment sector but is not among the six regional priority sectors, creating a structural misalignment between student activity and economic priorities.



QUALITY: ARE STUDENTS ACHIEVING QUALITY METRICS?



Industry Credentials
of concentrators earn one



Industry Credentials
of completers earn one



Early Postsecondary Credits (total)
~½ credit (.43) per concentrator



Postsec Enrollment of concentrators
9.7% of completers

Multi-Metric Standouts



Medical Skills & Services ✦

18% CREDENTIAL | 813 EPS CREDITS
20% POSTSEC — 2,221 CONCENTRATORS



Construction Technology ✦

15% CREDENTIAL | 316 EPS CREDITS
9% POSTSEC — 493 CONCENTRATORS



Pre-Engineering ✦

566 EPS CREDITS | 11% POSTSEC —
888 CONCENTRATORS



Architectural/CAD ✦

18% CREDENTIAL (COMPLETERS) —
94 CONCENTRATORS; STRONG QUALITY
AT SMALL SCALE

Quality Gaps (High Enrollment, Low Outcomes)



Agribusiness Systems

4% CREDENTIAL | ~5% POSTSEC —
3,443 CONCENTRATORS, LARGEST PATHWAY



Culinary Arts

7% CREDENTIAL | 7% POSTSEC —
2,151 CONCENTRATORS



Office Administration ✦

~0% ON ALL THREE METRICS —
1,103 CONCENTRATORS



Software Development ✦

~0% CREDENTIAL & POSTSEC —
664 CONCENTRATORS

✦ Priority sector pathway

WORK-BASED LEARNING: PARTICIPATION & DATA LIMITATIONS

Career Practicum participation across 49 pathways —
and the limits of what current data can tell us

18 of 49

Pathways with
WBL Activity

all via Career Practicum only

31 of 49

Pathways with
Zero WBL

may reflect reporting gaps

34%

Concentrators in
Zero-WBL Pathways

of all concentrators

THREE CRITICAL DATA ISSUES

1 WBL reporting is still maturing
Arkansas' standardized WBL data collection is relatively new. Districts are still building consistent reporting habits — **meaning current data almost certainly undercounts actual WBL activity.**

2 Only Career Practicum shows completions
Every WBL completion in this dataset is a "Career Practicum" course. Other recognized WBL types — internships, apprenticeships, job shadows, cooperative education — report zero completions across all 16 districts. **These experiences are happening on the ground but are not reliably captured in state data.**

3 "Zero WBL" and employer engagement
A pathway showing zero reported WBL may reflect incomplete reporting rather than absence of activity — **but it may also signal a lack of coordinated employer engagement.** Both possibilities warrant follow-up at the district level.

LARGEST PATHWAYS WITH ZERO REPORTED WBL

Ag Power, Structural & Technical Systems:
1,949 concentrators

Medical Office Administration: ✦
1,205 concentrators

Pre-Engineering: ✦
888 concentrators

Software Development: ✦
664 concentrators

Sports Medicine: ✦
612 concentrators

WBL course completion rates vary from 0% (Manufacturing) to 86% (Transportation, Distribution & Logistics).

✦ **Priority sector pathway**