

# The St. Louis Regional Education Commitment

A Shared Community Agenda to See St. Louis Become a Top 10 Region  
for Educational Attainment

## **Preamble**

The future prosperity of St. Louis—indeed the prosperity of individuals living and working in the St. Louis region—depends on a fundamental commitment to education as a top community priority. To ensure that St. Louis remains globally competitive, the region requires a strong and well-educated workforce as its core. A highly educated population is capable of adapting to the shifting demands of a global economy, withstanding the shocks of economic downturn, and identifying new solutions to improve the human condition. We also know that education bridges gaps. It reduces racial and socio-economic disparities and expands opportunity for all. Moreover, it enables people to realize their full potential as individuals and contribute to the welfare of the community.

It is our firm belief that no accomplishment will be more critical to our future as a region than the education of our citizens.

## **Our Goal**

Our goal is to ensure that the St. Louis region is recognized as one of the Top 10 most educated metropolitan regions in the United States by 2025. We can reach this goal if we commit to educating, attracting and retaining 93,000 more people.

The following outcomes reflect two primary metrics or benchmarks for realizing this larger goal:

- 40% of adults in St. Louis possess a Bachelor's degree or higher by 2025, an increase of 75,000 additional degrees beyond the current trend line. This would place St. Louis in the Top 10 of the largest metro areas in the percentage of adults who have a Bachelor's degree or higher by 2025.
- 10% of adults in St. Louis possess an Associate's degree by 2025, an increase of around 18,000 additional degrees beyond the current trend line. This would place St. Louis in the Top 5 of the largest metro areas in the percentage of adults who have an Associate's degree or higher by 2025.

## Guiding Principles For Positive Change

These principles provide a framework for defining our commitment. They reflect our values and aspirations. They also serve as key drivers for our effort to mobilize the St. Louis region to achieve our goal and will guide our thinking around public policy solutions that will create a system that supports our objectives.

- **Intentionally apply the racial equity lens when we design and execute strategy to get to our Top Ten goal:** developing and implementing strategies to increase educational attainment levels must focus on closing achievement gaps. They must focus on eradicating systemic barriers that preserve institutionalized or structural racism in our educational systems, which manifest in disparate outcomes for different populations based on race, ethnicity, language skills and zip code.
- **Our path to the Top Ten is inclusive of all educational paths that lead to meaningful economic opportunity and mobility:** Apprenticeship programs, career and technical education, high quality certificates provide meaningful pathways to opportunity while also meeting the needs of employers who demand talent possessing the “middle skills” – those skills that can be obtained by pursuing education beyond high school but not necessarily a four year degree.
- **Operate with an abundance mentality:** partners in this work recognize the value of collaboration in pursuit of our common goal and the importance of doing more to identify collective solutions that lifts all boats rather than assign blame or foster a competition for resources.
- **Utilizing and leveraging existing educational assets is key:** capitalize on the extensive array of community resources in St. Louis that connect people to learning opportunities.
- **A shared community agenda is necessary:** a collective commitment to the larger goal will ensure greater collaboration, coordination, and alignment of objectives and activities in pursuit of this goal.
- **Establishing common metrics to measure success is critical:** identifying indicators to measure progress toward our goal is essential to fostering collective accountability for reaching the Top Ten.
- **Policy change is critical to creating a more inclusive, equitable and affordable system of higher education:** policy solutions will drive the kind of institutional changes that will remove barriers and provide support to people pursuing education in the St. Louis region.
- **Ongoing evaluation and adjustment based on new learning will ensure success:** new strategies, collaborative partners, and research will enable us to effectively design solutions that help us to reach the Top Ten.
- **The business community plays a significant role in pursuing our collective goal:** the voice, will, and credibility of the business community can move our goal from a parochial education agenda to a community priority.
- **Our efforts should focus on improving our educational system:** while we support existing programs and initiatives, we know that improving educational outcomes requires efforts that will change the system through which we deliver education. Our movement will facilitate education reform.

**Education should focus on cultivating people as thinkers:** society moves in a positive trajectory when it is made up of individuals who can solve problems, think critically, and communicate effectively. The true purpose of education is to develop people and to expand opportunity for people to realize their best selves.

## **A People First Plan to Increase Educational Attainment**

Our strategy for becoming one of the Top 10 regions in the U.S. requires us to more effectively support five populations of students in their pursuit of greater levels of educational attainment. In crafting our regional commitment, leaders from across the St. Louis region identified the following strategies to increase the likelihood that students on each pathway will successfully enroll in higher education and complete college degrees and credentials.

These pathways include:

- Current, Traditional Students
- Recent College Graduates
- Working Adults
- Veterans
- Unemployed or Underemployed individuals

The specific strategies identified to support each pathway student population are included in the subsequent sections. These strategies reflect the best current thinking in our region on the most viable and targeted approaches for supporting the student populations based on their distinct needs. Leaders from various organizations came together in the summer of 2016 to identify and confirm the right plans for each pathway group.

Trusting the wisdom of leaders who know the student populations best, we are confident that the solutions identified are strong road maps for continued success in increasing the educational attainment of each student pathway group.

**Current, Traditional Students:** students preparing for and transitioning to college and working towards the completion of a college degree. We will focus on strategies that make a college education accessible to all and that support students in persisting through the completion of a college degree. A number of the strategies focus on how to strengthen college and career readiness in earlier years, recognizing that preparation for postsecondary education does not begin in high school.

- Significantly increase investment in quality early childhood education, recognizing that college preparation starts in the earliest years of a child's life. Investment in the earliest years will lead to significant returns in our region's college completion and workforce agenda in a way that sustains the movement beyond 2025 by ensuring more students are prepared for postsecondary education.

- Ensure that all students have access to high quality education prior to college that prepares them for success in a post-secondary education without the need for remediation.
  - For those who require extra support, eliminate remedial education in favor of co-requisite models and similar proven models.
- Collaborate with organizations that promote youth well-being prior to postsecondary education.
  - Leveraging and strengthening mentoring programs, jobs programs, and addressing out of school time should be part of a holistic strategy to support youth along their journey through education.
- Support and resource high quality training and ongoing professional development for educators to ensure that they are equipped to prepare all students for high levels of success, in the classroom, in their future career, and in their personal lives.
- Provide college counseling to all high school students to support students and families in exploring postsecondary opportunities and evaluating the best fit institutions that align to their career interests.
  - Ensure that this strategy is inclusive of career and technical education and promotes awareness among students and families that postsecondary technical colleges are strong pathways to economic opportunity.
- Expand opportunities for students to earn credits that can be applied toward a college degree, such as AP courses, Seal of Biliteracy recognition and standardized (dual credit/dual enrollment) credit transfer, while they are in high school.
- Increase support for students transitioning from high school to college by investing in essential resources that mitigate and ultimately eliminate summer melt.
- Develop and expand the use of early drop-out warning systems at the postsecondary level with use of data and intense advising, intervention and support to ensure that more students persist in their pursuit of a postsecondary degree.
- Improve career readiness by expanding access to work-based learning experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships, for students attending high school and college.
- Support and invest in regional alignment of St. Louis area collective impact efforts or initiatives that focus on improving outcomes for youth along the cradle to career spectrum. These include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - St. Louis Graduates
  - Forward Through Ferguson
  - Ready by 21
  - East Side Aligned

**Recent College Graduates:** graduates of our region’s institutions who have the opportunity to live anywhere and work anywhere. We will focus on efforts to attract and retain talent in the St. Louis region.

- Foster earnest and innovative collaboration between regional employers and colleges with the goal of increasing the likelihood that college graduates find in-demand job opportunities.
  - Expand experiential learning opportunities and internships for students.
  - Create awareness among current students as to which industries/companies are hiring college graduates and which degrees bring the most job opportunities.
  - Create a single platform for the region that centralizes job opportunities in the region and gives employers the opportunity to identify potential talent.
- Expand opportunities for students and recent graduates to make cultural /community connections beyond campus.
  - Create, support, or raise awareness about opportunities for students to connect to artistic venues that allow them to see St. Louis as a place where artists can thrive.
  - Foster greater mentoring relationships with cultural leaders and college students looking for opportunities to connect.
- Increase connectivity between neighborhoods and communities within St. Louis to make the region more appealing to young talent looking for walkable and livable communities.
  - Make it a business priority to support extension of mass transit, and other alternatives like bike lanes, so that St. Louis reduces car dependency.
- Strengthen connectivity between higher education institutions and business in creating support mechanisms for international students so that they face fewer barriers in trying to transition from college to a career in the St. Louis region.
- Execute the regional marketing strategy that promotes St. Louis as a city where recent graduates will want to work and live.
  - Market the region as a place where people can make a difference, a message that resonates with recent college graduates.
    - Align to positioning statement: “For purposeful people, seeking places where opportunities are abundant, St. Louis is a place where you can make a difference” as the core message

**Working Adults:** adult learners (ages 25-60) who are employed by our region's companies. We will focus on how to ensure that working adults have the resources, time, and flexibility to develop more skills through greater educational attainment.

- Employers must play a leading role in increasing the educational attainment of working adults:
  - Ensure higher education goals are tied to career advancement within the company. Be specific and intentional.
  - Provide tuition assistance to support employee goals.
  - Create more flexible work environments to accommodate the needs of learners.
  - Provide employees the resources they need to complete their higher education.
  - Expand childcare resources for parents and guardians to reduce challenges for working adults pursuing degrees.
- Higher Education institutions should continue to increase and improve programs that are tailored to the needs of working adults.
  - Improve orientation programs that focus on helping students understand how to use online tools for learning.
  - Expand or improve, in collaboration with employers, existing flexible learning options (Evening and part-time classes, online classes, blended courses) offered by 2 and 4 year colleges.
  - Utilize prior learning assessments to award students college credit for work experience.
- Increase resources and support for navigational coaching services geared toward the working adult population.
  - Develop and promote informational materials for working adults who are considering returning to school so that they can be more knowledgeable about St. Louis' occupational opportunities and make informed educational choices.
  - Create a "One Stop Shop" for employees to get the information they need about higher education options in the region.
- Launch a coordinated initiative involving universities, employers, and nonprofits to create seamless pathways between the classroom and the workplace.
  - Scale and fully fund the Gateway to Degrees initiative to foster such collaboration with the common goal of increasing the educational attainment of the working adult population in the region.

**Veterans:** working-age people who have served in the military. We will focus on unique opportunities and resources that could increase attainment levels for veterans.

- Improve the transition from military to civilian life with emphasis on supporting veterans in navigating the process for identifying career opportunities and educational pathways to support their goals.
  - Expand and strengthen programs that assist veterans with the transition from military life to student life such as the Missouri Returning Heroes Act. Ensure that services offered align with the needs of veterans.
  - Increase funding and availability of navigational coaching resources to provide the kind of college and career advising that veterans need.
  - Improve Transition Assistance Program (TAP) programs at regional bases and foster more engagement by higher education institutions and business in these programs.
  
- Collaborate with the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and university veteran's affairs offices to educate returning veterans on how to take advantage of their benefits. This process must start *before* veterans return home.
  - Offer "workforce readiness classes" with support from career placement organizations to help potential students think about career options and the types of skills they might need to be successful in the workplace.
  
- Create a task force of higher education leaders who can work towards creating a standardized process for enabling veterans to obtain credit for military experience and build a library of courses that makes it easier for institutions to recognize course credits for veterans in collaboration with relevant certifying boards or agencies.
  
- Standardize processes so that it is easier for veterans to access benefits and take advantage of services. Create a "one stop shop" for information about educational benefits for veterans.
  
- Expand and improve partnerships between universities, DOD institutions, and Veterans Affairs offices with the goal of accelerating attainment rates for the veteran population.

**Unemployed or Underemployed Individuals:** people who are currently not employed in our region and need additional education and training to obtain meaningful employment. This also applies to unemployed or underemployed foreign-born residents who require workplace language skills. We will focus on approaches that reduce barriers for unemployed people to develop the skills that will ensure participation in the workforce.

- Foster stronger partnerships with job training agencies and higher education institutions in the region in a way that supplements job training programs with higher education



courses that would lead to the accumulation of college credit.

- Increase access to shorter talent development programs, like apprenticeships, to quickly enable individuals to develop high quality skills that prepare them for meaningful employment opportunities.
- Ensure alignment of efforts with the work of regional Workforce Investment Boards to improve collaborations with job training and placement agencies, higher education institutions, and business in pursuit of the goal of further developing the talents of the unemployed or underemployed population.
- Increase use of methods to evaluate and to accept equivalent training/degrees from overseas where it can be documented, including review of Missouri professional certifications, to make them more responsive to the education and talent pool which is foreign born and foreign educated.

## **Accelerators of Success**

The following strategies in this section have been identified as overarching solutions to accelerate the success of students on all five student groups in their pursuit of a higher education degree. They cut across the five pathways and address system-level barriers to increased educational attainment rates. Along with a strong public policy agenda, implementing these strategies will create an environment that supports and sustains of the five student pathway populations.

### **Key Overarching Solutions:**

- Ensure greater collaboration between employers and educators
- Create an accessible and affordable system that increases educational attainment
- Ensure a system of seamless credit transfer
- Utilize uniform metrics to maintain accountability for results
- Promote a culture of life-long learning in the St. Louis region

These strategies were developed by the St. Louis Regional Higher Education Council and partners over the course of several months. Strategies were shaped and prioritized based by higher education representatives in partnership with business leaders and other thought leaders focused on how to remove barriers to degree attainment.

The following are forward-thinking solutions that will accelerate degree attainment opportunities for all people working towards the completion of a college degree.

**Educators and employers will collaborate to ensure that all individuals are prepared for rewarding work that enhances the St. Louis region.**

- Ensure economic development and business advocacy organizations partner with educators in K-12, colleges and universities, workforce investment boards, and job training providers to better align our region’s workforce system in a way that promotes economic inclusion and sustains a strong talent development infrastructure in the region beyond the 2025 goal.
  - The workforce system should provide ample pathways to a high quality postsecondary credentials—from certificates to graduate degrees.
  - Our workforce system should be both responsive to spot labor shortages today while also anticipating new skills demanded in the future.
- Increase opportunities for partnerships between faculty at higher education institutions and employers to improve curriculum offerings and provide more applied learning experiences for students.
- Expand and enhance work-based learning opportunities for students (ages 16-24) to promote career readiness.
- Create a mechanism for ongoing communication between business leaders and higher education to ensure that students are prepared to find meaningful employment in the St. Louis region.
- Support public policy that makes the region more competitive in recruiting and retaining top talent and that provides a means for higher education institutions to respond more effectively to the ever-changing needs of employers in the regions they serve.

**Create an accessible system that increases educational attainment and closes achievement gaps.**

- Foster greater public-private collaboration to expand need-based aid, particularly for underrepresented student populations and students with the greatest financial need.
- Ensure that the region’s community colleges play a critical role in accelerating attainment levels and closing achieving gaps by focusing on pathways and stackable credential opportunities for employment and/or further higher education, and in expanding diversity and inclusion opportunities within the higher education sector.
- Increase funding that addresses a student’s ability to pay, as defined by “expected family contribution” (EFC), and in the short-term, fully fund state-based programs, like Missouri’s A + program and Access Missouri, that intend to make college more affordable.
- Expand or strengthen programs at the P-12 and postsecondary levels that improve academic readiness and success.
- Align community resources to support academic preparation and college readiness.
- Expand financial literacy programs to support students and families in making smart consumer decisions.
- Improve policies at the institutional level that reduce the net cost of a college education for students.

- Increase or establish college counseling, navigational coaching, and student support services focused on making college more accessible.

**Credits will transfer seamlessly between all accredited institutions so that students can start anywhere and finish anywhere without duplicating coursework, increasing debt, or delaying degree completion.**

- Collaborate with the Missouri Department of Higher Education and the Illinois Board of Higher Education to convene institutions to improve the credit transfer process at regional institutions (both as receiver and sender).
- Expand articulation agreements among colleges within the region.
- Create a regional credit transfer policy that avoids duplication of coursework and that creates efficiencies in the system.
- Advocate for and support the development of a multi-institutional, regional database that would provide common access to current course equivalencies and articulation agreements.

**Uniform metrics will be established to allow the St. Louis region to measure and benchmark progress in the Top Ten strategy.**

- Collaborate with partners and stakeholders to identify indicators that measure outcomes along the P-16 educational spectrum, elevating existing metrics for measuring success in pursuing and completing college degrees.
- The racial equity lens must be applied to intentionally define metrics that measure our success in closing the racial achievement gap in educational attainment rates. Benchmarks, targets, and strategy should be aligned to the fundamental goal of creating a more equitable system and outcomes for students.
- Create a regional dashboard—to be updated regularly—that tracks progress along the determined indicators.
- Publish an annual report that highlights progress in achieving our Top 10 goal.
- Host an annual education summit to communicate progress, foster dialogue among leaders, and inspire action around regional initiatives and strategies that will “move the needle” in reaching the Top 10.
- Create opportunities for institutions to share data that allow for tracking progress of students pursuing and completing college degrees.
- Utilize National Student Clearinghouse data to determine the movement and progress of students from one institution to another.

**Promote a regional culture of life-long learning that recognizes the value of education at all stages of life.**

- Advocate for policies that ensure easy and equitable access to continued learning opportunities.
- Launch ongoing regional marketing campaigns that promote educational

attainment and talent development as a key to career advancement, professional growth and personal fulfillment.

- Celebrate and elevate examples of educational achievement at local and regional community events.
- Partner with key stakeholders to promote educational attainment and connect individuals to regional assets (e.g. libraries, museums, online education courses, continuing education programs at local universities) that promote continued learning.

## **Our Commitment**

Our ability to become a Top 10 region for educational attainment depends on the skill and determination of our leaders to maintain a collective vision and drive the necessary changes to ensure that more people are able to access and complete college degrees. This commitment represents an agreement by leaders in different sectors across the St. Louis region to provide resources that accelerate success for people pursuing higher education.

The St. Louis Regional Education Commitment will become the charter for a collective that will execute key initiatives, track progress and benchmark success, and coordinate resources to sustain progress in achieving our goal. The movement will be led by a group of leaders that reflects the cross-sector commitment to our goal to see St. Louis become one of the Top 10 most educated regions by 2025.

We, the undersigned, agree to support our regional goal, collaborate to pursue the key objectives to reach our goal, implement strategies to achieve our objectives, and lead with the principles that guide our efforts. In its purest form, our Commitment is to all students traveling on all pathways to greater education success. Our Commitment is to each other.