Unlocking the Power of Indiana's Workforce Development Boards

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Commissioned by: IN WORKFORCE ALLIANCE

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Executive Summary

Global economic and labor disruption make Indiana's workforce ecosystem more important than ever. Too many employers are struggling to find talent, Hoosiers lack the skills to fill jobs in strategic sectors, and young people need clearer, faster pathways to good jobs. These dynamics demand greater efficiency and alignment between Indiana's workforce and economic development systems.

Fortunately, Indiana already has many of the necessary ingredients for a thriving workforce ecosystem in place. The state is characterized by a robust roster of training and education providers, experienced public- and nonprofit-sector workforce leaders, and strong civic collaborations. The business-led network of 12 Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) helps ensure local priorities and employer needs are integrated into regional workforce service offerings. When fully leveraged, WDBs provide powerful laboratories of innovation that can drive rapid improvement in the workforce system, and they are uniquely positioned to make talent strategy the foundation of economic growth.

However, the power of the system of WDBs is limited by fragmentation in the talent ecosystem, funding cuts, inconsistent quality, and regulatory constructs that crowd out strategy. Addressing the barriers to a stronger workforce system is urgent and imperative for effectively serving the needs of hundreds of thousands of Hoosiers. This report lays out a practical agenda that will help WDBs further evolve from program administrators to strategic conveners and talent system architects. Success will require participation from all players in the state's workforce system, and below are the strategies and actions to achieve this.

1 Expand Workforce Boards' Strategic Focus

A. Increase strategic engagement by playing a more prominent role as convener.
B. Diversify and expand WDB funding streams.
C. Position Workforce Development Boards as authoritative training program brokers.
D. Leverage realignment of workforce and economic development as an opportunity to increase efficiency.

2 Elevate Employer and Education Partnerships

A. Increase employer responsibility as WDB leaders and potential funders.
B. Embed WDBs in regional K-12 and postsecondary planning.
C. Deepen WDBs' local leadership on apprenticeships.
D. Integrate WDBs into economic growth strategies.

3 Increase Public Funding Flexibility and Merge Program Administration

A. Provide WDBs with greater funding and flexibility.
B. Transfer administration of workforce-related human services programs to WDBs.

4 Strengthen the Indiana Workforce Alliance

A. Share best practices across WDBs and increase local capacity and support.
B. Formalize the Indiana Workforce Alliance's structure and enable stronger advocacy.

5 Build a Collaborative Statewide Strategy and Data Ecosystem

A. Establish a clear and collaborative statewide workforce strategy.
B. Build a more cohesive workforce data ecosystem.
C. Standardize and elevate training for WDB staff.

Overview and Context

Indiana stands at a critical crossroads in its economic and workforce development journey. With rapidly shifting labor market demands, Governor Braun is executing on a vision for aligning talent strategies with regional economic development priorities. The alignment of Indiana's workforce development regions with economic development regions, directed by executive order,[1] signals a strategic shift toward integrated, regionally responsive planning. This move reflects growing recognition of talent as the most important driver of economic competitiveness, and that workforce policy must be tightly coupled with business attraction, retention, and sector growth strategies. In this new landscape, Workforce Development Boards must play an even more critical role in shaping the infrastructure needed to meet Indiana's talent needs.

Indiana's workforce needs are immense. Over 400,000 Hoosier adults lack a high school diploma,[2] and an April 2025 white paper by Ivy Tech Community College and TEConomy Partners[3] shed more light on the urgency of Indiana's upskilling imperative. The report estimates that Indiana must upskill or reskill over 82,000 residents per year through 2035 to maintain its economic competitiveness. Critically, 69% of the jobs driving regional economic growth will require education or training beyond a high school diploma. Indiana's workforce system must prepare Hoosiers to fill these jobs—and quickly. As the state seeks growth in fields like advanced manufacturing, life sciences, mobility systems, and information technology, success will depend on regional delivery systems able to engage employers and match jobseekers to opportunities. Indiana's workforce infrastructure must be retooled and more fully leveraged to deliver results at the speed of economic change.

The Indiana Workforce Alliance commissioned Pathemy Strategies to develop an independent report assessing how Indiana's regional Workforce Development Boards can play a stronger, more integrated role in advancing the state's upskilling, workforce alignment, and economic development goals. Drawing on data analysis, research, and stakeholder input, this report examines many of the strengths and limitations of the current construct and offers recommendations that will enhance the impact of WDBs and improve statewide coordination. Pathemy conducted formal interviews with leaders from the Indiana Department of Workforce Development, Lilly Endowment Inc., the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, Ivy Tech Community College, Vincennes University, and Ascend Indiana, and also obtained input from Workforce Development Board leaders, the Indiana Workforce Alliance, and other workforce leaders and stakeholders.[4] The overarching goal of this work is to support the building of a more responsive system for addressing Hoosier workforce needs through the lens of the state's Workforce Development Boards.

Indiana's Workforce Development Boards are the front door for talent solutions in local communities throughout the state. Business-led and regionally embedded, boards are uniquely positioned to bring together employers, educators, social service providers, and community leaders to design pathways to good jobs. They are the proving ground for Indiana's talent infrastructure, piloting talent and career development programs to ensure more Hoosiers have access to the skills and supports they need to thrive.

THE ROLE AND REACH OF INDIANA'S WORKFORCE BOARDS

In a period when employers are struggling to find talent, Hoosiers need clear and faster routes to good jobs and young people must see tangible pathways into careers. Workforce boards offer the connective tissue linking regional economic growth strategies to the people who will power them.

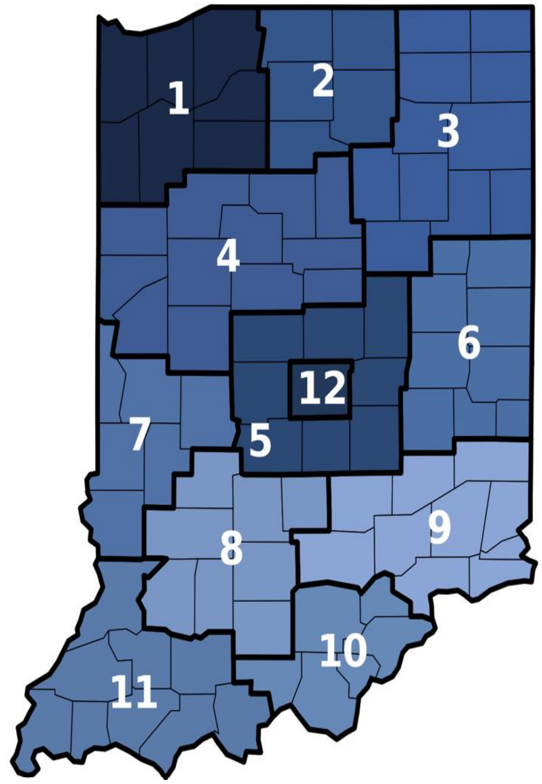
A key theme in this project was that the work and role of regional Workforce Development Boards in the broader, complex workforce ecosystem is often misunderstood. This section provides some background information and context on WDBs, setting a foundation that will provide better context for the insights and recommendations that follow.

Structure and Purpose

Workforce Development Boards are local groups of community leaders who help guide how federal and state workforce dollars are spent in their regions. The 2014 federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)[5] largely defined their current form, which required each state to establish boards that bring together representatives from business, education, labor, and community organizations. In simple terms, a WDB is an employer-led and locally responsive convener of talent solutions that helps ensure job training programs, career services, and employment centers are designed around what local workers and employers actually need.

In Indiana, the workforce system is divided into the 12 regions shown on the map below, each with its own Workforce Development Board.[6] WDBs are charged with overseeing employment and training services in their regions. Among other responsibilities, these boards oversee the network of about 70 WorkOne[7] centers—Indiana's version of the national network of roughly 2,400 American Job Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Labor through the state workforce boards.[8] These WorkOnes are the front doors where job seekers can receive help with resumes, job searches, training programs, or unemployment services. WDBs decide who operates those centers, which programs to prioritize, and how to coordinate with partners like community colleges, adult education providers, and social services.

While local elected officials appoint the board members, each board is governed by a majority business-led body comprised of local employers. These board members serve alongside workforce representatives, education and training providers, community and economic development officials, and other regional stakeholders. They are tasked with setting regional workforce strategies, managing public workforce funds, and ensuring services are aligned with labor market needs. The makeup of the boards reflects the intention that the system is demand-driven, as employers are best positioned to signal what skills they need in the workforce. The broad range of board representation ensures workforce program decision-makers understand perspectives of both the supply side (workers, students, and job seekers) and the demand side (employers and industry).

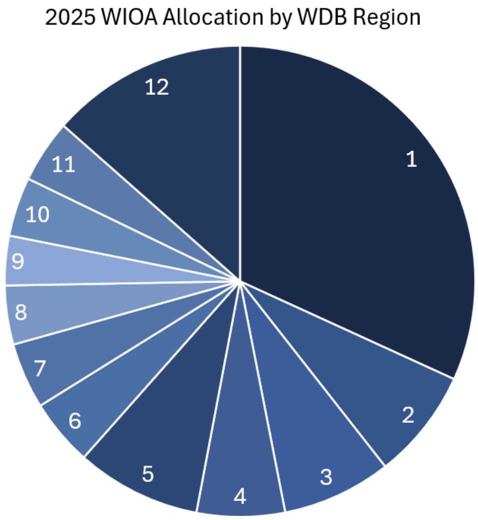


WDBs are one part of a larger ecosystem. At the top, the U.S. Department of Labor sets national rules and allocates funding. The Indiana Department of Workforce Development (DWD) manages the allocation of those funds statewide and provides oversight. Local WDBs then operate at the regional and local level, shaping programs that fit the unique needs of their communities. Structured at the intersection of education, business, and government, WDBs play a critical role in connecting workers to opportunities and helping employers find talent. They serve as the local forums where regions decide how best to prepare people for good jobs and support employers in growing the economy. The wide range of localized offerings make Workforce Development Boards Indiana's most accessible and regionally grounded workforce infrastructure.

Funding and Operations

WDBs coordinate a range of services through WorkOne career centers while also managing funding streams from the public sector and other sources. These include Wagner-Peyser, Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA), competitive U.S. Department of Labor funding streams for special priorities such as apprenticeships, Jobs for America's Graduates, philanthropy, Employer Training Grants, and employer contributions. However, the largest source of funds is for WIOA Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs.

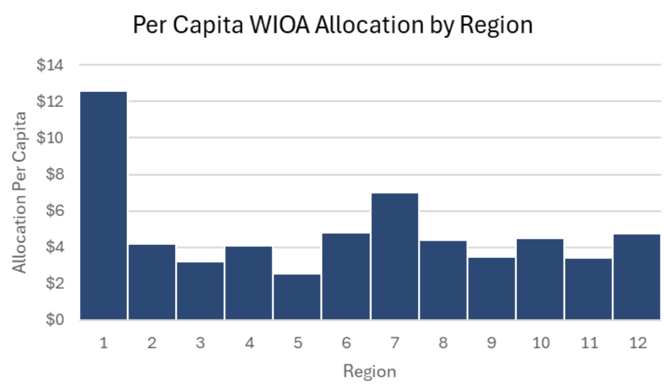
While there are many funding sources, the largest category is WIOA funding. In 2025, the State of Indiana received $41.3 million in WIOA funds to be distributed among the WDBs, and DWD retains a portion of this for administration. In 2015, DWD withheld $4.9 million of the state's $45.9 million WIOA allocation (10.6%). In 2025, the DWD holdback grew to $6.8 million (16.3%). With the total allocation decreasing by $4.6 million, WIOA funding received



by WDBs has dropped from $41.1 million in 2015 to $34.6 million in 2025. While Region 1 has seen a 77% increase in its WIOA allocation over the past 10 years, all other regions' allocations have decreased by between 14% and 43%.[9]

Many WDBs also leverage philanthropic and other revenue sources to support holistic workforce solutions. In 2024, WDBs received about $109 million from public, corporate, philanthropic, and other sources, but that total is sure to decline in 2025 and beyond due to over $20 million in funding cuts affecting Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG).

The WDBs are federally required to undertake a competitive selection process for the WorkOne operators every four years. Federal Wagner-Peyser funding helps pay for the frontline service staff at the WorkOne centers, which are required to be state employees. These individuals also provide services through RESEA, such as job search assistance, training referrals, career counseling, resume support, and ensuring unemployment insurance eligibility. RESEA services are conducted entirely by state employees in Indiana, as the funding that was formerly available for the WDBs to provide these services is now fully controlled by DWD. Employees of the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration provide Vocational Rehabilitation services through WorkOnes as well.



With subsets of WorkOne staff employed by different State agencies, the local workforce teams have a complicated mix of personnel who serve different employers and operate within very different reporting structures. Additionally, with layoffs affecting many state employees, including those in the WorkOne centers, remaining staff are challenged with taking on additional responsibilities on top of their existing portfolios.

The Work of WDBs

Indiana's WDBs oversee a large talent delivery ecosystem. In 2024, with $109 million in total funding from federal, state, and philanthropic funding sources, the WDBs provided some degree of career services or information to 288,000 Hoosiers and 18,200 employers.[10] Through the boards' WIOA operations specifically, 31,480 individuals completed programs, earning an average income of $40,840.[11] This reach includes adults seeking new skills, dislocated workers navigating career transitions, youth preparing to enter the workforce, and businesses in need of workers or training solutions. Through the network of WorkOne centers and affiliated service sites, the WDBs deliver job placement, career counseling, skills training, and wraparound supports. WDBs develop four-year local WIOA plans aligned with the state's strategic pillars, which are reviewed and connected into the State's WIOA plan.

WDBs have important adult education responsibilities, ensuring adult education providers' plans align with regional workforce efforts. Some WDBs serve as adult education providers, and all 12 regions work as intermediaries with the Office of Work-Based Learning and Apprenticeship to enroll Hoosier adults in Registered Apprenticeships. Some WDBs are also engaging in youth apprenticeships and serve as registered youth apprenticeship intermediaries under HEA 1002. The boards administer additional programs from a variety of originators, such as Indiana's Next Level Jobs Employer Training Grant. All 12 regions have administered Jobs for America's Graduates programs in their respective regions, although the JAG landscape is rapidly changing as described more fully below.

Indiana's workforce system is as complex as the needs are great. WDBs prioritize different strengths and innovate in different areas, such as Eastern Indiana Works' (Region 6) youth outreach and work-based learning opportunities, Western Indiana Workforce Investment Board's (Region 7) programs targeting women rejoining the workforce, or Southwest Indiana Workforce's (Region 11) oversight of a program to grow the advanced manufacturing pipeline. Below are some further nuances reflecting how the boards' responsibilities may vary:

- The **Center of Workforce Innovations**, which is the WDB for Region 1 in northwest Indiana and also the largest board in the state, is the only WDB that acts as the adult basic education provider for the region. In some other states, adult basic education providers are universally integrated with WDBs.
- **South Central Region 8 Workforce Board** is managed by Vincennes University.
- **Southeast Indiana Workforce Investment Board** (Region 9) was the only WDB in the nation to receive a Senior Community Service Employment Program grant directly from the U.S. Department of Labor.[12]
- **Southern Indiana Works** (Region 10) collaborates with KentuckianaWorks to serve the entire Louisville metropolitan area labor market. Southern Indiana Works, like Region 12's EmployIndy, is also working with Ascend Indiana to build out youth apprenticeship programs.
- **Regions 1**, **6** (through a partnership agreement), **10**, and **12** are State providers of career coaching services.

Successes and Strengths

Many parts of the state's workforce system are working well. For instance, with the support of each WDB as an apprenticeship intermediary, Indiana has become a leader in apprenticeships. With over 2,600 apprenticeship completions each year[13] and programs serving 25,250 active apprentices, the state supports more apprentices than every other state except California, Texas, and Ohio—and Indiana leads all three in per capita figures.[14] Through WDBs, Indiana provided WIOA Title II adult education career services to 25,806 individuals in the 2023-24 program year, and training services to 3,405.[15] About two-thirds of program participants see measurable skills gains,[16] and programs lead to increased employment stability and average annual wage gains of about $5,000 after one year and $10,000 after four.[17]

Indiana's Workforce Development Boards possess several unique strengths that position them as essential players in the state's talent development ecosystem. These include:

- **Extensive geographic reach and employer network.** WDBs are embedded in every region of the state with a geographic footprint in most counties, which enables them to tailor services to regional needs. They maintain relationships with thousands of employers across key sectors and can collaborate closely with local education and training providers to co-design credentialing programs that respond to local industry needs.
- **Responsiveness to economic shifts.** Similarly, as the locally grounded component of the workforce ecosystem that regularly engages with local industry, WDBs are able to quickly adapt programming in response to emerging labor market needs or regional disruptions.
- **Wraparound service delivery.** Each WDB oversees the operation of WorkOne career centers, which provides a comprehensive lens and positions WDBs as providers of critical ancillary supports such as transportation, childcare, digital literacy, mental health referrals, and case management. This ensures that other barriers to employment are addressed alongside skills development.
- **Cross-sector convening power and wraparound service delivery.** WDBs serve as the conveners across education, business, economic development, workforce, job seekers, and social services, bringing diverse partners together around shared talent goals.

Weaknesses and Challenges in the Workforce System

Indiana's public workforce system is far-reaching, yet it also faces persistent structural and policy barriers that limit its full potential. Key elements of the system remain fragmented, under-leveraged, and constrained by outdated or misaligned funding and administrative structures. These weaknesses limit the ability of WDBs to scale high-impact interventions. Addressing these barriers is essential for Indiana to meet its statewide upskilling needs and to build a more responsive, integrated, and sustainable workforce ecosystem.

Fragmentation within the workforce delivery and social service systems erodes coordination and diminishes the quality of services provided. The complex workforce ecosystem involves far more providers and stakeholders than any single organization can effectively coordinate. As a result, information, data, and priorities are often siloed rather than strategically shared, limiting collective impact. Too often, communication channels between Workforce Development Boards, state workforce and economic development agencies, and other partners are fractured or ineffective—creating unnecessary barriers to data access, informed decision-making, and a unified set of workforce priorities. This also restricts the potential for innovative solutions beyond baseline statutory and regulatory requirements. As one workforce leader interviewed for this project succinctly stated, “complexity zaps creativity.”

The lack of workforce system integration with other social services is another facet of the fragmentation issue. One prominent example of this is Indiana’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) employment services program—known as IMPACT—which is administered separately from the WDB system. As WDBs are the primary entities charged with helping low-income Hoosiers access job training and employment, the separation of TANF job-readiness efforts creates duplication and limits integration with WDB-provided supports.

Fragmentation also exists among WDBs themselves. While they are intentionally built to offer differentiated services that address unique workforce needs, there is often a lack of coordination across WDBs. This translates into differences in program design and implementation capabilities, varying levels of data access, and a lack of standardization in how the WDBs approach their work. Even within individual WDBs, various programs have different requirements for their data system architecture, resulting in multiple customer relationship management platforms or databases that are not connected to each other.

Underutilization of federal flexibilities available under WIOA and related regulations restricts possible innovative programs or more creative regional leadership in workforce challenges. Indiana often does not apply for waivers that reduce administrative burdens, integrate funding streams, and enable more customized service delivery. Other states have used waivers to fund incumbent worker training more broadly, ease eligibility rules, or blend adult education and workforce dollars. While Indiana has historically taken a cautious approach to these flexibilities, greater use of them could support regional collaboration and allow WDBs to more creatively serve employers and jobseekers alike.

Relatedly, a criticism of WDBs shared by various stakeholders is that they are pressured to be compliance-oriented rather than strategic. With a litany of regulations and bureaucratic nuances to navigate, the focus on “box-checking” limits the effectiveness of regional programming. Current funding and policy structures reward compliance over innovation and can reduce incentives to collaborate with other partners.

Declining and unpredictable funding through WIOA and State programs represents a growing threat to the stability and scalability of Indiana's regional workforce system. The Indiana WDBs' federal WIOA Title I funding (which is for Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs) dropped 16% over the past decade.[18] This erosion in base funding inhibits long-term planning and continuity of services. Indiana's WIOA funding trajectory reveals a system under increasing fiscal strain, even as employer demand and training needs continue to rise. Nationally, federal WIOA allocations to the states average $8.12 per person in 2025, with amounts between $26.50 in Washington, D.C. and $3.16 in Utah. In Indiana, this totals just $5.97, ranking Indiana 30th nationally for per capita federal workforce funding.[19] Indiana has seen the 10th worst decline in total WIOA allocations since 2015.

The decline in Indiana's WIOA funding has had a significant impact on the resources available to the state's Workforce Development Boards. Only one of Indiana's 12 regions has avoided a significant decline in funding and receives per capita allocations above the national average.

Region	Workforce Development Board	2025 WIOA Allocation	% of WIOA Distributions	10-Year Change in Allocation	Per Capita WIOA Allocation
1	Center of Workforce Innovations	$11,002,820	31.8%	77%	$12.60
2	Northern Indiana Workforce Board	$2,626,054	7.6%	-34%	$4.18
3	Northeast Indiana Works	$2,596,173	7.5%	-40%	$3.24
4	Tecumseh Area Partnership	$2,095,192	6.1%	-31%	$4.06
5	Region 5 Workforce Board	$2,967,505	8.6%	-27%	$2.55
6	Eastern Indiana Works	$1,587,231	4.6%	-40%	$4.78
7	Western Indiana Workforce Development Board	$1,565,136	4.5%	-14%	$7.01
8	South Central Region 8 Workforce Board	$1,398,815	4.0%	-35%	$4.39
9	Southeast Indiana Workforce Investment Board	$1,174,653	3.4%	-30%	$3.47
10	Southern Indiana Works	$1,402,808	4.1%	-23%	$4.48
11	Southwest Indiana Workforce Board	$1,494,955	4.3%	-43%	$3.43
12	EmployIndy	$4,671,180	13.5%	-31%	$4.76

Additional funding challenges have all but eliminated one of the WDBs' most effective and popular programs, Jobs for America's Graduates, which annually equipped about 10,000 Hoosier youth with career readiness, support, and real-world experience. JAG has delivered a 97% graduation rate (compared to a state average of 89%), strong postsecondary enrollment, and robust employment outcomes—providing employers with a steady pipeline of motivated young workers.[20] With changes to several State funding streams in Indiana's current two-year budget, over $22 million was eliminated from the $26 million-dollar JAG budget. Without JAG funding, thousands of at-risk students will lose access to a proven pathway to graduation, employment, and economic mobility, and employers will lose a critical source of skilled entry-level talent. This will eliminate hundreds of JAG sites from Indiana's network that had recently scaled to become the largest in the country.[21]

Varying levels of engagement and expertise among participating leaders and stakeholders is another challenge Workforce Development Boards must navigate. As the intended regional drivers of cross-sector collaboration and strategic alignment, WDBs are only as effective as the quality of the perspectives, data, and commitments they receive. Their mandate is to convene the region's most influential stakeholders who are best positioned to identify solutions to pressing workforce challenges and to turn shared insights into coordinated action. Yet the success of this work depends on mutual responsibility: WDBs must create the structures, forums, and strategies that invite authentic participation, while stakeholders must lean in with candor, creativity, and sustained engagement. Only when both sides fulfill their respective roles can regions unlock strategies that genuinely strengthen their workforce ecosystems.

Aligning Workforce Development with Economic Development

Governor Braun has made talent alignment a central pillar of his administration's economic strategy. In early 2025, the Governor directed state agencies and regional partners to align Indiana's workforce development regions with its economic development regions, a move designed to improve coordination, reduce duplication of efforts, and streamline service delivery across agencies.[22] In September 2025, the Governor affirmed the state's 15 READI regions as Indiana's official economic planning regions, which also play an important role in local talent strategies.[23] These regional realignment efforts reflect a broader recognition that workforce development is economic development, and that talent pipelines must be treated as core infrastructure for attracting and retaining businesses in key growth sectors.

Many WDBs already function as a regional talent arm of economic development, helping local governments and chambers align training pipelines with business attraction priorities. Boards can supply workforce data for site-selection proposals, coordinate training for expanding employers, and lead sector-specific initiatives alongside economic development organizations. These activities should be explicitly supported and expanded as Indiana implements regional realignment.

Indiana's Workforce Development Boards must have a critical role in this evolving landscape. As federally mandated, business-led entities, WDBs bring together employers, education and training providers, and public agencies to identify regional talent needs and develop targeted solutions. Many boards are engaged in local economic development planning, participating in business attraction, regional industry initiatives, and broader talent efforts. In some regions, WDB leadership has been formally integrated into regional planning organizations, contributing labor market insights and coordinating workforce investments that align with targeted industry clusters.

However, there is still significant room to deepen collaboration between WDBs and regional economic development entities. As Indiana advances in its realignment of workforce and economic development, state and regional leaders should ensure that WDBs are empowered to help inform and shape regional economic strategies. This includes embedding workforce metrics into economic development dashboards, integrating WDBs into targeted business attraction efforts, offering joint funding opportunities, and incentivizing collaborative planning efforts. Formalizing these partnerships will help Indiana's talent infrastructure evolve in step with its economic ambitions.

Best Practices from Other States

As Indiana seeks to strengthen and modernize its workforce delivery system, several other states offer helpful models for maximizing the impact of regional Workforce Development Boards. These states have implemented reforms that empower local boards, support shared infrastructure at the state level, and tightly align workforce strategies with regional economic development priorities. A few examples are described in this section, and their approaches provide actionable lessons that Indiana can adapt to meet its own upskilling and talent alignment goals.

Social services and funding flexibility. Texas has been a national leader in decentralizing bureaucratic functions and empowering local boards to tailor services to regional needs. Through its "Choices" program, Texas shifted administration of TANF employment services (comparable to Indiana's IMPACT program) to its WDBs, allowing for more integrated service delivery and eliminating redundant systems.[24] Texas also makes extensive use of WIOA waivers to support flexible funding, reduce silos, and incentivize innovation at the regional level. The result is a more streamlined workforce system that prioritizes employer engagement, regional autonomy, and efficient delivery of wraparound services—all features many Indiana stakeholders have expressed interest in replicating.

Economic development integration. Michigan offers a powerful example of integrating workforce and economic development planning. The state's regional boards are deeply embedded in local economic development efforts and have formal partnerships with regional planning commissions and industry councils.[25] Michigan's talent development framework centers on sector-based strategies, often co-led by employers and workforce boards, with coordinated use of labor market data to shape training investments.

Michigan Works!, the statewide workforce board and support organization for the local boards, has developed standard forms used by local workforce boards to share information when the state is leading a major business attraction or retention investment opportunity. Some of Michigan's local boards receive funds from the State's economic development agency to assist with some of these activities. For example, local workforce boards are receiving about $3.5 million in funding in connection with the state's Electric Vehicle Jobs Academy.[26] Additionally, Michigan provides regional boards with strategic funding beyond WIOA formula dollars to provide them with more tools for responding to emerging employer needs and workforce trends.

Georgia's Quick Start program provides free, customized workforce training as an incentive to attract new companies to the state. While it has operated for decades, it adapts to changing industry needs and remains the state's most effective discretionary incentive. The program operates by meeting with company leadership, experts, and operations teams to define the scope of training needs. Teams then map out unique training plans for each interested company in various strategic industries, with an emphasis on visual learning and hands on training. These training programs are conducted in classrooms, mobile labs, or onsite at the companies they serve. Quick Start has helped update skills of over one million employees through 6,500 formal projects with employers.[27]

Data sharing. The State of Virginia has addressed the structural inefficiencies in piecemeal workforce data approaches by establishing the Virginia Office of Education Economics (VOEE).[28] The VOEE streamlines labor market data collection and dissemination, helping reduce redundancy and decreasing spending. VOEE works closely with key partners such as state agencies, higher education institutions, and the state's Board of Workforce Development. VOEE enables organizations and programs to access high-quality, consistent data without duplicating efforts by providing access to a centralized source of labor market data. In addition to resources like a high demand occupations dashboard[29] that resembles similar tools in Indiana, the VOEE's resources also highlight how different occupations align with various workforce program offerings in the state. The real value in this effort is the integration of high-demand occupations with the priorities of the Virginia Workforce System, alignment with WIOA, and accessibility by employers. By centralizing this information, the collaboration led by VOEE helps programs and institutions focus more on talent development implementation and less on redundant data collection.

Neighboring Kentucky also has a strong workforce data model. The Kentucky Center for Statistics was established in 2012 to collect and integrate education and workforce data, sharing information and insights with policymakers, practitioners, and the public to inform decision-making. Tools like this enable the state and its partners to determine which program's or institution's graduates are earning good wages and how well programs are meeting the needs of industries.[30] Kentucky also funds outreach to local chambers of commerce to feed consistent demand signals back to the state.

Recommendations

Indiana's workforce system is in a watershed moment. Bold, coordinated action can transform how Workforce Development Boards function and how the broader workforce ecosystem delivers for both employers and jobseekers. Indiana's WDBs are uniquely positioned to drive this transformation: they are regionally embedded, employer-led, and equipped with the infrastructure to scale solutions across the state. To address the challenges head-on, Indiana must align policy, funding, and strategy in ways that remove silos, expand capacity, and empower WDBs to play a more integrated and strategic role in economic development.

The following strategies and tactics are designed to help the WDBs, the Indiana Workforce Alliance, and state workforce leaders capitalize on opportunities for growth. They reflect insights from stakeholder interviews, lessons drawn from peer states, and a realistic assessment of Indiana's current system strengths and constraints. Collectively, these strategies and actions point toward a workforce system that is not only more efficient and coordinated, but also more innovative, responsive, and outcomes-driven. Implemented together, they will allow Indiana to better connect workers with good jobs and strengthen the state's long-term economic competitiveness.

1. Expand Workforce Boards' Strategic Focus

Indiana's Workforce Development Boards sit at the intersection of business, education, and community—uniquely positioned to align talent strategies with regional economic growth. To fulfill this role, boards must be consistently empowered to move beyond program administration and embrace their capacity as strategic conveners that mobilize partners and lead innovation in workforce delivery. The following tactics outline how WDBs can strengthen their leadership to drive a more coordinated and effective workforce ecosystem across the state.

A. Increase strategic engagement. A recurring theme from stakeholder interviews was that WDBs must see their missions as much bigger than WIOA. Workforce Development Boards operate with blended funding portfolios, and they must be increasingly recognized not only as administrators of WorkOne career centers but also as strategic conveners of regional talent systems. To achieve this, WDBs need to more consistently engage in outreach and live up to their purpose as leaders, conveners, and problem-solvers in the workforce ecosystem. Some do this more than others, and a strong workforce ecosystem demands this mentality from all WDB leaders. At the local level, boards should rebalance staff time away from focusing on compliance and toward activities that build partnerships, engage employers, and design solutions to regional skills gaps. This requires hiring and empowering staff who can serve as conveners and strategists, bringing together community partners to co-create workforce solutions.

As part of their strategic efforts, WDBs should partner more with businesses, chambers of commerce, university career services offices, and others to build shared strategies that support groups of small and midsized employers with similar needs. This ensures custom solutions that involve only a few jobs for small employers can be paired with others to grow the impact of service offerings. Talent strategists can work with specific industry sectors to design career pathways and improve onboarding and retention. To deepen employer relationships, WDBs should implement structured employer engagement plans that go beyond ad hoc outreach. These could include forming new partnerships, co-designing training programs with employers, and tracking employer satisfaction metrics.

Among the feedback from stakeholder interviews was that WDBs must be political, and they must view building community relationships as a core component of their jobs. Many Workforce Development Boards have only loose relationships with policymakers, and local or state officials often lack a complete understanding of the services WDBs provide. This disconnect was perhaps most consequential during the 2025 legislative session, which featured funding and program cuts that affected WDBs. Boards need to deepen and formalize their engagement with local and state policymakers to ensure the value of the regional workforce system is clearly understood and consistently supported. Maintaining active, year-round relationships with public officials and civic leaders means going beyond occasional updates and instead systematizing regular interactions such as district visits, site tours of WorkOne centers, and data briefings that highlight outcomes, workforce needs, and employer perspectives. These activities reduce misperceptions about what WDBs do and build long-term champions who can advocate for stronger policies and resources.

B. Diversify and expand WDB funding streams. Funding is essential to operating more strategically. WDBs must get creative and further diversify their funding streams in order to achieve sustainability and impact at scale. WIOA funding alone is insufficient to meet the full range of workforce and training needs, and its allocations have steadily declined in real dollars over the past two decades. While WDBs earn funds beyond WIOA, they vary in the extent to which they diversify and in many cases are challenged by an overdependence on WIOA dollars. To address this, boards should intentionally pursue funding strategies that leverage multiple public and private sources. For example, Career and Technical Education (CTE) funds could help backfill recent state cuts to the JAG program and support aligned youth career readiness activities. Similarly, Pell Grant eligibility for short-term credentials, recently expanded by Congress, creates new opportunities for WDBs to collaborate with higher education providers and employers in making high-demand, short-duration training more accessible and affordable to adults.

Beyond these sources, WDBs can also explore additional opportunities to leverage employer training investments, philanthropic contributions, and economic development funds to supplement workforce programming. This would provide greater resilience against state or federal budget fluctuations, while giving boards the flexibility to pilot new strategies and scale innovative programs.

C. Position WDBs as authoritative training program brokers. Workforce Development Boards should strengthen their role as trusted, data-driven facilitators by becoming the default source of information on training programs and their quality. This positioning should be supported by DWD through its management of the state's Eligible Training Provider list. WDB efforts could include developing transparent provider scorecards that track key metrics—such as cost per successful placement, credential attainment, wage growth, and long-term employment outcomes. WDBs can also support postsecondary partners' curriculum development processes to ensure their offerings are stackable, portable, and directly connected to career pathways in high-demand fields.

WDBs can play a bigger role helping both learners and employers make informed choices about where to invest their time and resources. Leaning into this "honest broker" function would not only increase accountability among training providers but also ensure that limited public and private dollars flow to programs that deliver the highest return on investment. Over time, this approach will build greater confidence in the workforce system, steer participants toward the most effective pathways, and strengthen the alignment between training supply and labor market demand.

D. Think big: leverage realignment for greater efficiency. Whether local boards are ready or not, a repositioning of the state's workforce ecosystem is imminent, and WDBs need to plan for it. Indiana's realignment of workforce and economic development districts creates an immense opportunity to rethink the structure and sustainability of Workforce Development Boards. With federal and state workforce funding facing continued cuts, boards must act intentionally to reduce costs while expanding impact.

WDBs should pursue colocation strategies where they have not already done so, housing their operations and WorkOne centers alongside other social service providers, economic development entities, or education partners to maximize accessibility and share infrastructure costs. By embracing bold structural changes, Indiana can stretch limited dollars further and ensure that WDBs remain resilient in a challenging funding environment.

2. Elevate Employer and Education Partnerships

Indiana's long-term economic strength depends on deeper collaboration between employers, educators, and Workforce Development Boards. These relationships form the bridge between talent development and private sector growth—ensuring that training programs, career pathways, and economic strategies reflect real labor market demand. As described in the following tactics, by engaging employers as active investors, embedding boards in education planning, and integrating workforce strategies into regional economic development, Indiana can build a system that more seamlessly connects learning to opportunity.

A. Increase employer responsibility. Many Indiana employers seek expansion or introduction of new programs at the WDB level or have been frustrated with funding cuts to programs they benefit from. Yet these employers are often unwilling to contribute funding or engage in formal advocacy. Employers that can significantly benefit from specific programs need to be willing to advocate for and pay into programs they prioritize, which will help WDBs diversify their funding streams and make them less reliant on public resources. Employers comprise a majority of the representation on Workforce Development Boards, so they need to take responsibility for the performance of boards. Through policies or incentives, DWD can encourage employers serving on WDBs to take a more active role in driving program outcomes.

B. Embed WDBs in regional K-12 and postsecondary planning. To create a seamless education-to-employment pipeline, Indiana should integrate Workforce Development Boards into regional education planning structures, including K-12 career pathways initiatives and higher education planning efforts. WDBs should partner with both the K-12 community and higher education on priorities such as remedial adult education. This collaboration would make it easier for workforce leaders to share regional labor market data and help schools align academic offerings with real-world career opportunities. Involving WDBs early in the planning process ensures that curricula, internships, and advising strategies are shaped by the actual needs of employers.

C. Deepen WDBs' local leadership on apprenticeships. While all 12 WDBs are intermediaries that execute registered adult apprenticeship programs, the level of their involvement in youth apprenticeship models varies. With efforts like CEMETS iLab Indiana driving much of the future growth in workforce development through youth apprenticeships, WDBs cannot afford to take a back seat to the work being done on these programs at the local level. It is important for WDBs to stay relevant, and that will require participating in efforts like the Indiana Career Apprenticeship Pathway (INCAP). Economies of scale are often a problem for apprenticeships with small numbers of possible participating individuals or employers, so WDBs can play a strategic role in bringing together groups of small and mid-sized employers for aggregated apprenticeship programs. WDBs should take advantage of opportunities to be the entity that brings together apprenticeship programs across federal, adult, youth, and DWD efforts.

D. Integrate WDBs into economic growth strategies. Indiana's economic competitiveness depends on aligning talent development directly with business attraction and retention goals. Rarely are WDBs involved in Indiana's code-name economic development projects, and that needs to change if workforce and economic development are to be more aligned. State government is taking steps toward this by aligning workforce and economic development within the commerce "vertical," and regions should follow suit by expanding the role of Workforce Development Boards in economic planning and sector strategy development. Embedding WDB leaders in regional development authority boards, sector councils, IEDC project teams, and industry collaboratives ensures workforce considerations are central to growth planning and major deal negotiations. This integrated approach will strengthen alignment between talent pipelines and business needs, while presenting prospective businesses with a unified value proposition: shovel-ready sites paired with talent-ready communities.

3. Increase Public Funding Flexibility and Merge Program Administration

Indiana's workforce system can only reach its full potential if funding is flexible, integrated, and aligned with how services can best be delivered. Fragmented funding streams and rigid program silos limit innovation and create unnecessary barriers for both jobseekers and employers. By consolidating related programs and expanding the use of flexible funding mechanisms, Indiana can empower regional innovation and ensure resources are directed toward the highest-impact strategies for talent development.

A. Provide WDBs with greater funding and flexibility. To support innovation and regional responsiveness, DWD should allocate increased discretionary workforce funds with more flexible eligibility criteria and as few categorical restrictions as possible, including through pursuit of federal waivers where appropriate. Boards can be faced with rigid funding rules that prevent them from addressing emerging needs, such as incumbent worker training or digital skills development. Greater funding flexibility, paired with accountability for outcomes through the existing American Job Center delivery system, would help WDBs invest in the most impactful strategies for their regions based on their unique labor market challenges. In addition to more flexibility in state funds, Indiana can join in advocacy to Congress for more flexible block grants.

The JAG program is worth special attention. Indiana's Jobs for America's Graduates program was once a national model, serving thousands of Hoosier students each year and demonstrating exceptional outcomes. With recent funding cuts, the infrastructure is disintegrating. While immediate restoration may not be feasible, lessons from JAG's success should inform future youth-readiness investments that combine career navigation, mentoring, and work-based learning. Indiana should seek renewed funding mechanisms for high-return investments in Indiana's talent pipeline, whether through dedicated state appropriations or flexible block grant mechanisms.

B. Transfer administration of workforce-related human services programs to WDBs. Indiana should strongly consider transferring the administration of employment-related human services to the Workforce Development Boards. This includes the State's IMPACT program, FSSA's Vocational Rehabilitation staff, and adult basic education. IMPACT and the Vocational Rehabilitation staff are led by the Family and Social Services Administration; adult basic education providers are selected by the Department of

Workforce Development. Integrating these State services with the WDBs, like Texas' successful "Choices" program, would reduce duplication, simplify the end user experience, and allow for the delivery of more coordinated case management. With WDBs already serving low-income adults and jobseekers through other programs, consolidating program oversight would foster greater efficiency and accountability.

The Vocational Rehabilitation program currently receives over $16 million in State support,[31] the IMPACT program receives over $9 million in State support,[32] and the annual appropriation to DWD for adult education is nearly $17 million.[33] Transferring these programs to WDBs would not only reduce the service burden on state government, it would reallocate millions of dollars annually that would substantially grow operating funds for the boards.

4. Strengthen the Indiana Workforce Alliance

Several stakeholders offered feedback that focused on the potential benefits of increased standardization among WDBs and the need for more efficiency. Interviews made clear that Indiana's workforce ecosystem could be noticeably more effective if the WDB support organization was given greater responsibilities and supported with a full-time staff. This could be through an expansion of the Indiana Workforce Alliance, or it could be realized through a merger of the Alliance with another statewide ecosystem builder. Below are recommendations reflecting ways the Indiana Workforce Alliance can support a stronger workforce ecosystem.

A. Share best practices across WDBs and increase local capacity and support. While each WDB must remain responsive to its unique regional context, there are significant benefits to be gained by codifying and scaling proven practices statewide. When boards develop effective models for career navigation, training, or wraparound supports (as many have), these should not remain isolated but should be shared and adapted by others. The Alliance should facilitate peer learning, WDB staff training, and a more formal mechanism for evaluating and disseminating best practices. In many other states, the statewide workforce board association runs most of the training programs for local workforce staff. Indiana should consider similar centralization, as well as education for board members to enhance their effectiveness. The Alliance could also develop and formalize partnerships with other providers that can benefit all WDBs, such as with the Indiana Chamber's Talent Pipeline Management program to build capacity among WDB personnel.

By necessity, Workforce Development Boards operate with lean staffing, which can make it challenging to take on activities beyond core requirements. The Alliance can play a critical role in addressing this and supporting regional capacity for increased innovation by providing targeted technical assistance and disseminating best practices in areas such as grant writing, program evaluation, and sector strategy development. Additionally, certain administrative or specialized functions should be centralized at the Alliance level, allowing boards to benefit from economies of scale and shared expertise, particularly for roles that do not require full-time staff at the regional level.

Also, each of the 12 WDBs maintains a separate license for Lightcast's workforce data tool, when it would be less expensive for the Indiana Workforce Alliance to maintain one license with sub-licenses for each of the regions. By strengthening both back-office and leadership capacity, Indiana can ensure its workforce system operates with greater consistency, efficiency, and effectiveness across all regions.

B. Formalize IWA's structure and enable stronger advocacy. The Indiana Workforce Alliance should consider formalizing its organizational structure in a way that strengthens both service delivery and statewide advocacy. Establishing a dual structure—maintaining the current 501(c)(3) entity while adding a 501(c)(6) membership arm—would allow the Alliance to expand its scope and impact. The 501(c)(3) can continue to focus on research, capacity building, and technical assistance, while the 501(c)(6) could engage in policy advocacy, member representation, shared services, and resource pooling for procurement of software systems. This dual framework is commonly used by associations that balance public-serving missions with the need to influence policy and provide operational value to members.

Michigan provides a helpful model. The Michigan Works! Association receives about $1.5 million from a combination of State funds and contributions from the regional workforce boards.[34] With this funding, Michigan Works manages multi-region contracts, conducts robust professional development for staff, facilitates data-sharing, and provides policy and advocacy services.

By adding more staff and formalizing its structure, the Alliance would be better positioned to negotiate statewide data-sharing agreements and provide centralized administrative support where efficiencies can be gained. It would also give the Alliance the ability to more effectively pursue additional funding streams, as well as represent the collective interests of WDBs in legislative and policy discussions. In many instances, this advocacy function can be a benefit to public-sector agencies such as DWD, which are not able to lobby for priorities like additional JAG funding in the same way that third-party associations can.

The Alliance could help the WDBs by developing a standard method of tracking and reporting on outcomes from programs, as many WDBs struggle to run full, high-quality reports that capture the impact from the range of services they provide. Another tool the Alliance could develop is an employer advisory registry populated by each region, so boards can deliver quickly when the State needs employer voices. A more formalized Alliance will amplify the work of WDBs and create a stronger connective tissue that more effectively aligns Indiana's workforce, education, and economic development efforts.

5. Build a Collaborative Statewide Strategy and Data Ecosystem

Indiana's workforce development system will only reach its full potential if state agencies, educators, economic development leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders work in concert with Workforce Development Boards to design and build an integrated and sustainable talent infrastructure that meets economic needs. The following tactics are intended to support a more integrated and responsive workforce infrastructure that will be better able to meet Indiana's long-term talent and economic goals.

A. Establish a clear and collaborative statewide workforce strategy. Indiana has an opportunity to craft a truly collaborative statewide workforce strategy that integrates locally derived priorities with state goals as part of a shared framework. Indiana's workforce and economic development efforts can benefit greatly from a unified, statewide strategy led by the Governor's Office in coordination with the Department of Workforce Development, the Indiana Economic Development Corporation, and other stakeholders. Regional boards should help shape this strategy to ensure they are positioned to implement it. This framework should lay out the Administration's top priorities and set targets that Workforce Development Boards, higher education institutions, employers, and the K–12 community can collaboratively work toward. *America's Talent Strategy: Building the Workforce for the Golden Age*,[35] which was released by the federal government in August 2025, provides some inspiration. Establishing clearer priorities will advance cohesive collaboration and promote clarity of mission among the many organizations serving workforce needs.

B. Build a more cohesive workforce data ecosystem. Data gaps are limiting the workforce system's potential. Indiana should invest in a better integrated workforce data infrastructure that connects actionable intelligence across education, training providers, Workforce Development Boards, employers, and social service partners. Unlike many states, Indiana's WDBs do not have data-sharing agreements or access to valuable individual-level data from DWD (including wage records), and qualitative data from the WDBs often fails to reach the State. Building a stronger data sandbox will require expanded data-sharing infrastructure and agreements between local providers and statewide leaders.

A cohesive, connected system will make important information—such as program outcomes and labor market trends—easier for policymakers and practitioners to access and analyze. Enhanced data infrastructure will not only strengthen strategic planning and enable continuous improvement, but it will also make the value of WDB services more transparent to the public and to decision-makers. By breaking silos and creating a unified platform for workforce data, Indiana can drive smarter resource allocation and ensure workforce policies and investments are grounded in real-time evidence.

Data sharing is an issue even among and within WDBs. There are a range of customer relationship management tools and systems at the WDB level, and they are not interoperable, even within a single WDB. Other states, such as Michigan, have devoted significant resources to the integration of these systems.

While data challenges will take time to resolve, DWD could quickly play a bigger role in helping generate leads for WDBs. Privacy concerns may limit some DWD individual data sharing, but DWD maintains a robust list of data and contact information for individuals who can benefit from services offered by WDBs, and DWD should reach out to these people to connect them with services

To move from vision to execution on the overall data strategy, Indiana should solidify a statewide data governance consortium that brings together workforce ecosystem leaders around a common data playbook. An effort aligned with this is currently being facilitated by Ascend Indiana, which will need to be collaboratively expanded and sustained. Indiana can learn from successful models from other states such as Virginia and Kentucky.

C. Standardize and elevate training for WDB staff. To ensure consistent and high-quality service delivery across regions that is aligned with the State's workforce strategy, Indiana should establish a statewide framework for Workforce Development Board staff and board member training. Currently, capacity and expertise vary widely, which can limit boards' effectiveness. State policymakers and ecosystem leaders should work with the Indiana Workforce Alliance to create a standardized training and professional development program—potentially partnering with a third-party provider such as the Indiana Chamber's Institute for Workforce Excellence. Such a program could cover core competencies like labor market analysis, employer engagement, program evaluation, and compliance, while also offering advanced modules in sector strategy design and talent pipeline development. The statewide training framework should be aligned with DWD's staff-development standards and performance expectations to ensure fidelity to State priorities while elevating overall service quality. A consistent statewide training model would build a stronger bench of workforce professionals, reduce regional disparities in service quality, and equip Indiana's WDBs to deliver greater impact for jobseekers and employers.

Conclusion

Indiana stands at a crossroads. As global and regional labor markets continue to evolve, the need to equip Hoosiers with the skills that drive economic mobility and meet employer demand has never been more urgent. The scale of the challenge—upskilling hundreds of thousands of adults in the coming years while supporting youth, dislocated workers, and employers in a disruptive and rapidly changing economy—demands a coordinated, responsive, and well-resourced system. At the same time, the opportunity to act is substantial: Indiana benefits from a strong foundation of regional Workforce Development Boards, recent state-level momentum toward regional alignment, and increasing collaboration across sectors.

WDBs are not simply program administrators; they are Indiana's most scalable, demand-responsive workforce infrastructure. Their reach, credibility, and flexibility make them ideal vehicles for delivering high-impact, employer-aligned training solutions and wraparound services. But realizing their full potential requires deliberate action from leaders across the full workforce ecosystem. Through collaborative leadership and a renewed focus on execution, Indiana can create a stronger workforce system that better prepares Hoosiers for the future of work.

Indiana's Workforce Development Boards cannot succeed alone. Their success depends on active collaboration with state leaders, employers, educators, and other civic partners. Each has a role to play in co-creating a workforce system that is innovative and aligned with Indiana's economic ambitions.

- **Workforce Development Boards** must embrace their role as strategic conveners leading cross-sector collaboration, aligning programs with employer demand, and championing innovative, regionally tailored solutions.
- **Indiana Workforce Alliance** should standardize best practices and build the shared capacity, data systems, and advocacy infrastructure needed for a stronger, more unified workforce ecosystem.
- **State Leaders** need to collaboratively lead the statewide strategy, enhance funding flexibility, and integrate human-service programs under WDB leadership.
- **Employers** must treat WDBs as the talent arm of economic development and be co-investors in training and apprenticeships.
- **Education and Other Partners** need to strengthen connectivity with WDBs, foster talent innovation, and further develop pathways aligned with regional job demand.

Seizing this moment requires bold, forward-thinking investments in infrastructure, leadership, and policy reform. Together, these actions will unlock the full potential of Indiana's workforce system and drive the state's future prosperity

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